The importance of partnership

collaborative learning culture in songwriting higher education

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ABSTRACT

Given the increasingly market-driven and consumerist environment of higher education in the UK, this article will argue the importance of a 'partnership learning' approach, which requires engagement, investment and a sense of shared responsibility from both tutors and students. At the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP), small-group learning is integral to the ethos of our creative programmes. Our interactive, learner-led sessions offer our students a weekly opportunity to develop creative and critical independence in their thinking and practice. With specific reference to our songwriting programmes, this article will explore how widely-established best practice in teaching can be most effectively deployed in the design and delivery of specialised, industry-relevant creative workshops. It will conclude that collaboration between tutors and students in the creation of a bespoke learning culture is integral to effective songwriting learning and teaching, as well as the cultivation of independence – a key graduate attribute – in degree-level students.

KEYWORDS

Songwriting

Partnership learning

Power dynamics

Marketisation

Co-creating culture

Self-directed learning

Student satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In the current landscape of higher education, the idea of degrees as a service that students buy (Brown 2015: 5) or a commodity that they must possess (Nixon et al. 2018: 928) is becoming more pervasive. Institutions are expected to be:

responsive to student desires, wants and "needs", despite the ancient insight that seeking the learner's satisfaction extinguishes more enduring intellectual development engendered through challenge, struggle and problem solving. (ibid.: 929)

Simply put, this notion of pleasing 'customers' – necessary because their satisfaction scores are fed directly to regulators, as well as being available to prospective future customers – can act as a direct threat to the fundamental aim of higher education to develop graduates who demonstrate 'the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility' (QAA 2014: 26). This article will explore how an inclusive, collaborative approach to learning and teaching culture, as developed on the Institute of Contemporary Music Performance (ICMP)'s songwriting programmes, can contribute to a wider institutional culture of independence and responsibility, thus encouraging students to map their sense of satisfaction directly to the contribution they are making to their own experience, rather than expecting to be 'kept happy' at all times.

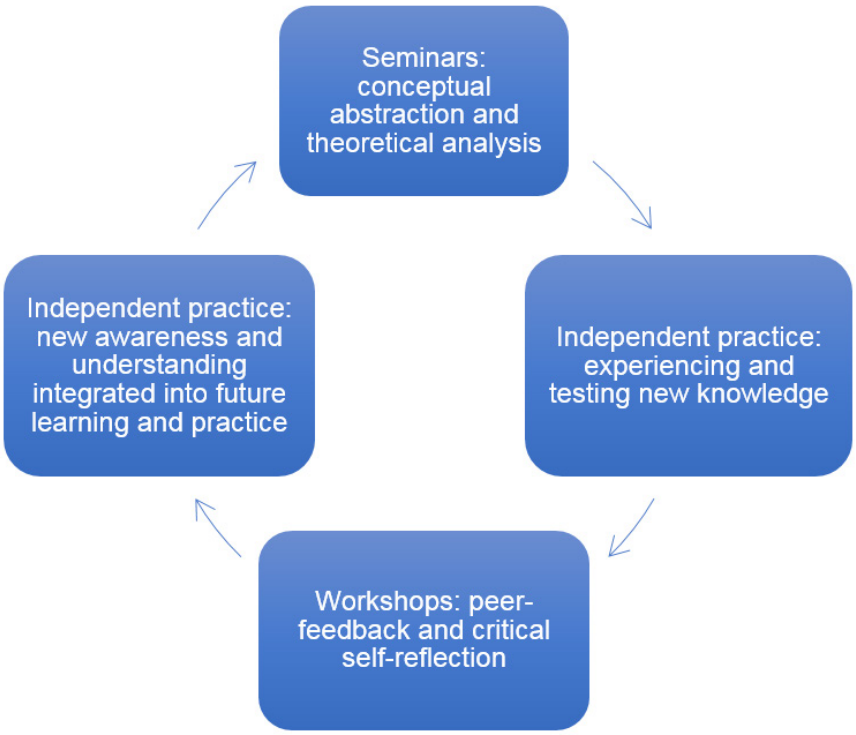
THE STUDENT-CONSUMER

The marketisation of higher education positions 'the satisfaction of the sovereign student as a legitimate and central imperative of the HEI [higher education institution]' (Nixon et al.

2018: 929): it has fundamentally changed how students engage with degree-level study. With ever-increasing competition and regulatory oversight, the pressure on HEIs to drive up student satisfaction metrics is unlikely to subside. However, enrolling on a degree programme cannot be viewed as a straightforward purchase: in this transaction, the 'customer' is explicitly agreeing to undertake a period of intense learning which has been designed to be challenging and transformative. This experience is likely to involve failure, frustration and discomfort, which, whilst unacceptable when dining in a restaurant, are integral aspects of the process of developing intellectual and practical autonomy; and, whilst students may not recognise this as one of their needs at the time, this is an important aspect of the 'commodity' they have paid lots of money for.

THE WORKSHOP LEARNING MODEL: INDEPENDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

As Kay Sambell argues, it is essential to 'equip students to be able to undertake learning and assessment independently of their teachers after they have left a formal educational setting' (Sambell 2011: 6). This cultivation of independent thought and practice is a key priority in popular music education, as it helps to prepare students for the endemic uncertainties of a career in music. At ICMP, students are tasked with songwriting activity to be undertaken independently, with the resulting material being brought to the following week's session for presentation, critical self-reflection and group discussion and feedback. This experiential learning model – based on David Kolb's learning styles model, first published in 1984 (Kolb 1984) – enables students to actively engage with new concepts; to construct meaning by relating these to their prior knowledge; to engage in a new experience that tests out the knowledge; and then to consolidate their understanding through critically reflecting on what they have done.



Experiential learning on ICMP's songwriting programmes.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ON ICMP'S SONGWRITING PROGRAMMES.

As part of this learning model, feedback workshops require students to assess how new principles and techniques are being integrated into their practice, which cultivates creative and critical independence. As Sambell (2011) argues, *high level and complex learning is best developed when feedback is viewed as a relational process that takes place over time, is dialogic, and is integral to the whole process of learning and teaching itself... The abilities and disposition to review one's own work, and that of others, are essential graduate attributes which HE should foster, because they underpin a learner's capacity to learn autonomously. (p. 5)*

A feedback-based approach is not only integral to the study and practice of songwriting but also fundamental in the cultivation of graduate skills and qualities. If students explore and develop their ability to critically self-reflect by engaging in 'deeper learning' (Akhtar, 2015: 1), they are more likely to establish creative – and professional – independence.

PARTNERSHIP AND POWER

The cultivation of 'critical communities' (West 2016: 179) is an essential element of songwriting and, arguably, all degree-level pedagogy. For this to work, the tutor needs to cultivate a healthy and trusting community within which this kind of critical discussion can take place. Harrington et al. (2014) argue that 'Partnership learning communities... facilitate deep connections between staff and students and lead to enhanced learning and motivation for all community members' (p. 28). These cultural values are highly relevant to a successful songwriting workshop: students need to learn how to take risks in their work and be prepared to 'fail' in this; learn to trust their peers enough to hear their feedback (and offer their own in turn); learn to use the group as a creative and critical resource; and to start to take ownership of their own development. However, establishing trust and encouraging students to challenge deeply held views can be problematic. When teaching songwriting, it is common to encounter resistance to creative change. This is because students usually bring some level of received

understanding to their study and practice. As mentioned earlier, this understanding acts as a useful basis for enquiry. Students have often absorbed key conventions and principles via 'osmosis' (Green 2001: 99) without necessarily realising that they have done so, the effect of which is that students often value the idea of their 'innate' ability and talent over theoretical knowledge, technical skill and developmental practice, and are thus threatened by critical analysis and peer feedback. The 'rock ideology of "authenticity"' (ibid.) is persistent, and this preoccupation – that instinctive and unexamined song content is somehow more 'real' than that which is crafted – poses a major developmental roadblock for many students. It is therefore important that songwriting teaching is transformative: the role of the curriculum – and the tutor – should be to help the student identify what they feel is innate and deliberately seek to disrupt their own embedded sense of status quo. The challenge, however, is to facilitate this in an unthreatening way, so that students do not disengage from the learning process altogether.

POWER AND POSITIONALITY

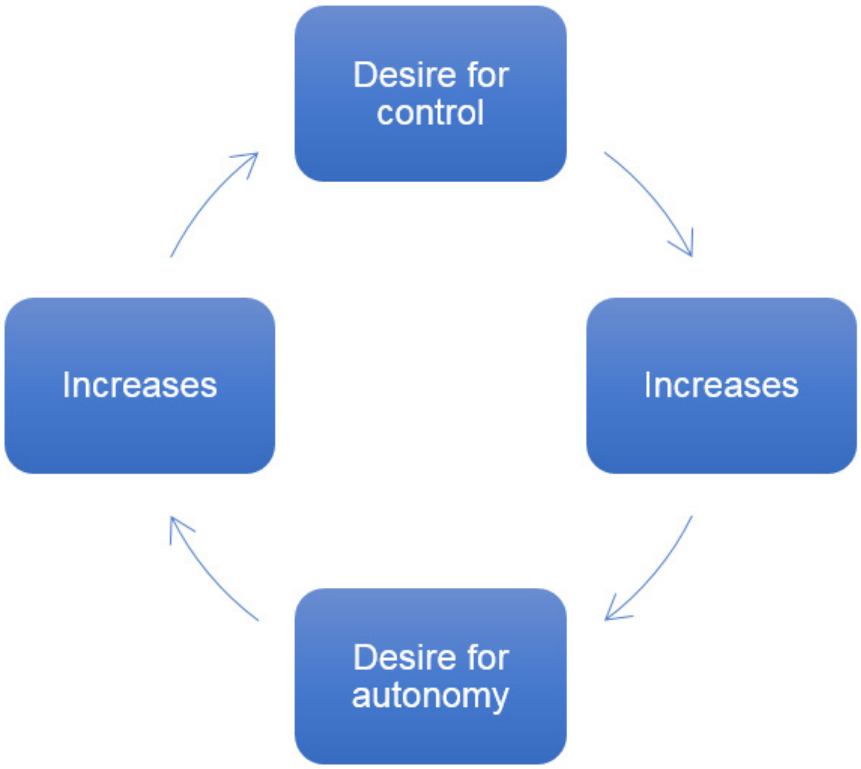
How a teacher positions themselves within a classroom setting depends on the subject being taught, the institutional setting, the level and the objectives for the session. As Farukh Akhtar (2015) argues, 'A student group can take on a life of its own. Where educators locate themselves in this process is crucial [in] maximizing the potential of all students' (p. 1). Simply put, if a tutor changes their position within the learning activity, it is likely to have a significant impact on the experience of their students. In his recent book, Social constructionisms, which explores the nature of human interactions, Titus Hjelm discusses the concept of 'social power' and defines it as 'an agent's intentional use of causal powers to affect the conduct of other participants in the social relations that connect them together' (Helm 2014: 73). This concept is highly relevant to the construct of the classroom, where the teacher holds structural power over their students. It is crucial that this power is closely considered in the context of songwriting feedback workshops, in which the teacher's role is to support their students in achieving their own insights into their practice.

In his seminal text on teaching, Jim Knight dedicates a whole chapter to the issue of power dynamics in the classroom. He acknowledges that, whilst power structures are needed for effective learning, there are certainly alternatives to the traditional models:

'Power with' is an alternative to 'power over'; it involves authentic power we develop with students, as opposed to power over, which is coercive power we hold over students to keep them in place. (Knight 2013: 267)

The concept of 'power with' is highly relevant to the songwriting workshop model: students are being asked to present their creative work and to engage in open critical discussion so they can identify how they might develop the work. This can be a highly confronting experience. Adopting an authoritarian position would therefore be inappropriate, as it can distance the tutor from their students' experiences. Knight (ibid.: 265) refers to the work of Robert Sutton on this point: '"'power over", which he [Sutton] calls "power poisoning", can keep leaders from understanding their subordinates' concerns and needs.' If a workshop is too instructional, students can start to assert a very unproductive sort of autonomy: they may stop listening, become defensive and entrenched in a position of 'knowing'. At this point, learning and enquiry are effectively suspended and an unproductive atmosphere usually follows for the remainder of the session. This is neatly summarised by Knight as a 'control–autonomy vicious cycle', as illustrated in the diagram.

Retreating from an overt leadership role and further embodying a 'power with' dynamic seems much more productive. By allowing students to assert more power and control in the cultivation of their cultural practices, a teacher is 'empathising with, connecting with, and respecting students' (ibid.: 267).



The 'control–autonomy vicious cycle' (Knight 2013: 267).

As Hjelm (2014) argues,

Power is constantly at work in this process [of internalising norms], although after a point it becomes 'invisible'. We conform to expectations – in differing degrees – even without anyone constantly reminding us about the proper ways to act and be. (p.74)

If, as a tutor, one is able to create a sense of 'space' in the classroom, so that students are empowered to explore and determine their own social practices in their feedback workshops, they are then able to create their own unique culture and assert their autonomy in the process. As Norman Fairclough argues, 'social structures not only determine social practice, they are also a product of social practice' (1989: 37). Knight endorses this by pointing out that 'Teachers can shape a learner-friendly culture by proposing productive or positive norms for their learning community or involving students in creating the norms' (ibid.: 251). This principle directly involves the students in the shaping of their learning experiences, which has positive implications within the classroom and, more broadly, for institutional culture, including notions of satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The tension inherent in reconciling customer satisfaction with academic rigour needs to be met head-on by higher education professionals. Didactic teaching models are not only unengaging – and we must remember the value that students now place on their satisfaction and pleasure – but they position the student as a passive consumer of a learning experience, rather than an active agent who has power and influence over what and how they learn. If we can help our students to see themselves as independent and empowered members of a collaboratively formed learning community, they are less likely to behave like a restaurant customer furiously awaiting the arrival of a heavily delayed order. It is therefore crucial that more formalised teacher training practice becomes more fully embedded in the culture of higher education. At ICMP, this has seen a move away from the master–apprentice learning model – a long-established aspect of vocational training centres – and towards more learner-centred models. As argued, not only does this result in more engaged and independent students, it can also contribute to students' sense of autonomy and, ultimately, satisfaction with their degree experiences. ■

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