'Collaborative creativity' within a jazz ensemble as a musical and social practice

Ailbhe Kenny*

Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore 'collaborative creativity' within the musical and social practices of a local jazz ensemble in Ireland. Within this study, concepts of creativity are firmly rooted within socio-cultural contexts where practices are 'situated' and 'collective'. Through investigating aspects of 'collaborative creativity' practices such as privileging improvisation, maintaining challenge, and building knowledge through leadership and collaboration, the research explores the connections between creativity and collaboration within a genre-specific ensemble. This qualitative case study gathered data from observations, video recordings, interviews and participant logs over a nine-month period. Thus, the varied research methods allowed for both group and individual perspectives to inform the data analysis. The findings illuminate the distinct creativity practices of the jazz ensemble within shared learning processes. Key features of how creativity was led, encouraged, facilitated and negotiated within the jazz ensemble are presented. The case study provides theoretical perspectives rooted in everyday group music making experiences about an important socio-cultural perspective of creativity, both as a musical and social practice.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction and background

In seeking to explore 'collaborative creativity' in practice, this case study research examines a local jazz ensemble in Limerick city, Ireland. This serves as a context to understand how 'collaborative creativity' was characterised, negotiated, fostered and promoted through leadership and membership within one particular adult musical group. Taking a socio-cultural theoretical lens, the research presents insights into 'collaborative creativity' through the musical and social practices of the jazz ensemble in context, and captures members' perspectives on the creative aspects of these practices.

Through this investigation, the findings intend to challenge assumptions within creativity discourse and particularly add to the knowledge base on 'collaborative creativity' within creativity, music and education research. Through providing valid and reliable data about the significant place of creativity in group music making, it is hoped to inform educationalists, policy makers, and academics of the social, 'lived', shared learning and meaning making that manifests itself through group creativity practices. Opportunities to foster environments, institutions and communities to further develop collaborative, creative music making experiences are thus highlighted.

* Correspondence to: Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick, Ireland. Tel.: +353 61774721.
E-mail address: ailbhe.kenny@mic.ul.ie

1.1. 'Collaborative creativity'

This article conceptualises 'creativity' through the lens of 'contextualised' and 'collaborative' creativity (Burnard, 2006, 2012b; Craft, 2008; Eteläpelto & Lahti, 2008; Humphreys, 2006; John-Steiner, 2000; Littleton, Rojas-Drummond, & Miell, 2008; Miell & Littleton, 2004; Moran & John-Steiner, 2004; Sawyer, 2003a, 2003b, 2006a). Through this lens, the collaborative processes of group creativity within particular contexts are the focus. Characterising creativity as a group process resonates with Becker's writing about 'art worlds' where he argues, 'collective action' is an integral part of any arts collective (Becker, 2008, p. 34). Such groups have the potential to develop what Moran and John-Steiner refer to as 'creative collaboration' where both the 'complementarity' and the 'tensions' within groups help create the right conditions for creativity to occur (John-Steiner, 2000; Moran & John-Steiner, 2003; Moran & John-Steiner, 2004). In a study of a long term community of student teachers, Eteläpelto and Lahti (2008) emphasise the importance of shared history within a group for practices of collaborative creativity to develop, claiming, "Out of the history of the group comes the gradual establishment of a certain kind of culture, a customary way of doing things and collaborating" (2008, p. 228).

Within a 'contextualized' view of creativity, Lave and Wenger offer some interesting perspectives from a 'community of practice' framework. This framework views communities as sites for 'situated learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasising the centrality of acquiring knowledge through participation in socio-cultural contexts. In a similar vein, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) puts forward a concept of 'situated creativity' where creativity is viewed as lying within the socio-cultural relationship between person, domain and field – presented as a 'systems model' of creativity. Within this jointly constructed model, certain rules and conventions are required within the domain (e.g. jazz music) for creativity to occur. A field of experts, peers and an audience (especially with musical performance) validate creativity and so give it a sense of worth. The person then is required to bring something to the field and domain that is 'creative'. At its peak, or 'optimal experience' individuals are said to experience 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Csikszentmihalyi's work has influenced this contextualised and collaborative view of creativity within music research where there has been an increased interest in examining collaborative creativity rooted in specific contexts (Burnard, 2012a, 2012b; Colley, Eidsaa, Kenny, & Leung, 2012; John-Steiner, 2000; Kenny, 2014; Littleton & Mercer, 2012; Miell & Littleton, 2008; Sawyer, 1992, 2003b, 2006b). Burnard's recent work on 'musical creativities of practice' emphasises this socio-cultural view of creativity (2012b, p. 31):

> The act of musical creativity establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships between people, between the individual and the social group, between the individual and the society, and between the society and the ever-expanding creative spectrum of web space.

Building on Csikszentmihalyi's 'systems model' and Bourdieuian conceptual tools, Burnard rejects linear or singular conceptions of musical creativity and instead offers a means of understanding the multiple sites of practice(s), relationships, modalities, systems, capitals and innovations that are involved in the practice of creativity. The term 'creativity' then is employed to describe a multiplicity of processes as opposed to a particular outcome (Burnard, 2012b).

Sawyer characterises music as 'a collaborative practice' and 'a communicative activity' (2006b, p. 161). In studying jazz ensembles in particular, where improvisation holds a privileged place within the genre's practices, Sawyer views improvisation as "the extreme case of group creativity" (2003b, p. 13). When players are in the 'improvisation zone' Sawyer claims (2003b, p. 41):

> . . .groups attain flow by staying in the improvisation zone between complete predictability and going too far, between their shared knowledge about conventional situations, and doing something so inconsistent that it just doesn't make sense.

For example, Berliner describes such an outcome as "striking a groove" (1994) while Seddon coins it is as "emphatic attunement" where; "improvisers go beyond responding supportively to their fellow musicians and stimulate the conception of new ideas" (2005, p. 50).

The research examined in this article emphasises collaborative creativity as an inherent part of the jazz ensemble's practices. Therefore, the case study presents creativity as a collaborative endeavour within a real world context, viewed as essentially a social and collective process.

2. The case study

The Limerick Jazz Workshop (LJW) is an adult ensemble-based teaching and performing initiative based in Limerick city, in the mid-west region of Ireland.[1] The LJW was set up in 2007 as a not-for-profit body by members of the Limerick Jazz Society. Some financial and accommodation support is provided through national and local government funding, with the latter demonstrating recent developments in Ireland with regard to local government involvement in the arts (Kenny, 2009, 2011). The LJW aims to promote participation in playing jazz by providing jazz ensemble teaching and performing opportunities

---

[1] Limerick city, within County Limerick is the third largest city in Ireland. The city alone has a population of approximately 100,000 people with an almost doubling of that figure across County Limerick.