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## **Creativity and Community in an Entrepreneurial Undergraduate Music Module**

**Fay Hield and Stephanie Pitts**

Higher education institutions (HEIs) have been awash with buzzwords in the last decade or so, as teaching has become ‘entrepreneurial’, ‘enquiry-based’, ‘reflective’, ‘collaborative’ and ‘creative’ (e.g. Gaunt and Westerlund, 2013; Burnard and Haddon, 2015). While the words may change with sometimes alarming rapidity, these approaches share an underlying encouragement to academics to think creatively about educational practice, and to consider the impact of students’ learning experiences on their broader development and future destinations. The Music in the Community module that forms a case study for this chapter came about through one such University of Sheffield initiative around ‘enterprise’ education – a term used (often interchangeably with ‘entrepreneurial’ education) to capture the interplay of thinking and doing through cycles of reflexive and experiential learning. First popularised in school curricula with an increasing focus on preparation for work and citizenship, enterprise learning involves students having ‘the freedom to come up with ideas for creating and maintaining a project, take responsibility for it and experience first-hand learning which offers a real sense of utility and audience’ (Deuchar, 2004: 224). The approach has relevance for university level musicians who need to be responsive and flexible thinkers in their learning and their future careers, and worked well as a framework for our shared research and teaching interests in community music. Our new undergraduate module put students in touch with community groups in Sheffield, and engaged them in commissioned pieces of research and planning around potential musical activities. These community-based projects were intended to support and enrich the organisations, while

developing the students' skills in managing group work, applying their musical skills to new contexts, and articulating and evaluating the benefits of music in community settings.

Authors more experienced than us in the teaching of community music have pointed out the risks of the 'marriage of convenience' (Cole, 2011) which links formal sites of learning (HEIs) with the activist roots of many community groups, risking a clash of cultures that might be unhelpful for both parties – and particularly for the students who traverse the two. While Moran and Loening (2011) write in positive terms about their experience of 'knowledge exchange' as a motivation for research connections between academics and community musicians, Williamson, Cloonan and Frith (2011) have pointed to the 'knowledge resistance' that can inhibit the sharing of mutually valuable perspectives across institutional boundaries. Despite these cautionary notes, the value of learning within community contexts has also been affirmed in previous case studies (Mellor, 2011), and the potential for benefit to both universities and community partners highlighted through the development of communities of practice (Hart and Wolff, 2006). We therefore embarked on the module with a naïve enthusiasm for broadening our students' (and our own) experiences, learning from and with local community partners, and hopefully contributing something to the valuable musical work that was taking place in the city.

Having now taught the module twice, with different partners and students involved, this chapter offers us the opportunity to reflect on how a module which aimed to be 'enterprising' brought with it many creative and educational challenges – for us, the students, and the community partners. These challenges came at all levels, from module planning, through the design of the research briefs with the partners, to facilitating the students' group work, and deciding on the fairest ways to assess their learning.

## **Priorities and Possibilities in Module Design**

Our Music in the Community module was offered to second and third year music undergraduates at the University of Sheffield in Spring 2013 and Autumn 2014. We recognised from the outset that we had insufficient time (and indeed expertise) during the course of a twelve-week module to train our students as ‘community musicians’ as defined by Higgins (2012) – namely, musicians with the skills to design and deliver semi-professionalised politically motivated music educational interventions. Instead, we focused on building their understanding of the practical effects and theoretical positioning of community music in its various forms, through interdisciplinary weekly lectures, discussions and reading, and in applying and further developing this understanding through a reflective journal and a group research project. Following Kolb’s (1984) ‘experiential learning cycle’, we designed the module to combine traditional lecture formats with practical engagement and to encourage connections between group and individual learning. Within the enterprise framework of the module, this diversity of approaches enabled us to explore and emphasise creativity in multiple forms. Alongside building individual creativity, students worked to develop collaborative creativity in their groups, communal and intercultural creativity with their community partners, and empathetic creativity as they navigated the experiences and needs of the wider community (Burnard and Haddon, 2015). Following Csikszentmihalyi’s assertion that creativity is ‘the ability to add something new’ (1999), we focused on advancing our students’ skills in identifying opportunities for the development of new approaches rather than specific skill-set transfer.

Our partner organisations were drawn from the diverse musical provision in the Sheffield area: in 2013, the students were commissioned to produce feasibility studies for musical projects to support mental health service users (Sheffield NHS Trust) and refugees and asylum seekers

(Learn for Life), and in 2014 we worked with an urban regeneration group (Heeley Development Trust). In each case, the partner organisations were engaged in some musical provision already, but were looking for ways to evaluate and expand this, or to demonstrate its effects to external funders. The students' task was to review existing provision and spot the gaps and potential in the organisations' activities: while a few students engaged in practical workshop delivery as a way of demonstrating and developing their ideas, their main creative input was in the design and justification of their plans. All partners expressed awareness that there might be costs in staff time and potential inconvenience to the organisation, but also a clear hope that the projects might yield valuable insights and information.

In the first lecture of the module the partners came to meet the students, who then worked in groups of six-eight to develop a strategy for fulfilling the research brief, which had been written by us in consultation with the partners, but with sufficient flexibility for the students to find their own focus and interests for their project. Heeley Development Trust, for example, were already putting on concerts, but wanted to know how to reach more of the local audience, to extend their provision to children and young people, and to gather evidence to demonstrate the value of their activities

Alongside their group work, we wanted the students to develop their individual understanding of music and/in communities, so we asked them to write a weekly reflective journal, which they submitted online for feedback, before selecting three entries for assessment. This too was a creative challenge for the students, as they were required to think and write in new ways, and to engage in personal analyses and interpretation rather than drawing solely upon established theories. We provided guidelines that encouraged them to move beyond description of their learning experiences into genuine reflection on their changing thinking (Department of

Education and Training, 2007). Finally, the students also submitted an essay, the most ‘traditional’ element of our multifaceted assessment approach, but one which still allowed the students freedom in their choice of essay topic, and led several of them into new areas of community music not explored in the lectures and set readings.

The requirement to assess generated a sometimes uncomfortable tension between the encouragement of risk and exploration that was central to our understanding of developing creativity and entrepreneurial skills, and the provision of criteria, word limits and deadlines. We recognised the barriers to creative teaching identified by Spendlove and Wyse (2008: 16) of ‘playing safe’ and being constrained by accountability – in this case to our partner organisations as well as to our students. Of particular concern to us and the students was the assessing of group work, which is notoriously problematic (Burdett, 2003) despite its increasing presence in higher education (Hillyard, Gillespie and Littig, 2010). We made a deliberate choice to avoid the further pitfalls of peer- and self-assessment (McLaughlin and Simpson, 2004), choosing instead to weight the assessed components more heavily towards the individual essay (50%), and the reflective journal (20%). While this alleviated the students’ fears, expressed at the point of module enrolment, about the negative impact that undertaking group work might have on their marks, it resulted later in complaints that the high level of work involved in the group report (30%) should have been recognised through a more substantial weighting. However, the implicit link between the weekly reflections and the group work did have the advantage of focusing the students’ attention on their own learning over time, which previous studies have shown to be a critical dimension of effective group work (Goodman and Dabbish, 2011), and one which focuses evaluations of student creative practices by measuring success as *process* rather than *product* or *output* (see Bennett, Reid and Petocz, 2015).

## **Research Methods**

In order to reflect more closely for this chapter on the students' experiences of the module, we sent them a short research questionnaire after the assessment process had been completed. In this, we asked a series of multiple choice and open-ended questions about their learning in the module, and the ways in which this might connect with their other experiences as music students. We explored how their experience of the module fitted with our conception of it as enterprising and creative by asking them 'What should we call this kind of learning?' and offering a selection of possible descriptors drawn from the higher education pedagogy literature (see [Table 1](#) in the discussion below). We also sought students' permission to use the reflective journals that they submitted weekly during the module, as these had proved to be rich with examples of the creative application of academic knowledge derived from lectures and reading to the practical community contexts in which the student groups found themselves. These data collection methods were approved through the University of Sheffield research ethics processes, and students were assured of their anonymity and their freedom to participate or not as they chose, without any consequence for their assessment or future learning.

Relatively small numbers of responses were received, perhaps due to the unusual nature of the request and its timing around the assessment period. From the 2013 cohort of 17 students, five questionnaires and journals were submitted, while from the 2014 cohort of 26 students, we received only two responses. While the data collected cannot therefore be considered as representative of the two cohorts, the responses did add useful perspectives to our own reflections on the modules, providing illustrative case studies that helped to question and develop our own observations as module tutors. In the discussion that follows, students have been

allocated pseudonyms, and any personally identifying details have been removed. We also consulted the partner organisations about anonymity and all agreed to be named in our chapter, so allowing us to acknowledge here their substantial contribution to the students' learning.

### **Creativity in Student Learning and Experience**

The Music in the Community module aimed to engage the students in creative learning – with its enquiry-driven and entrepreneurial approaches (Craft, Cremin and Burnard, 2008) – at both the individual level, as they reflected on their learning in their weekly journals and carried out independent reading for their essays, and collaboratively, as they worked on their group project and liaised with the external partners. The students' responses to these challenges were evident in the enthusiasm and anxieties they expressed at different points in the module, and in the discussion that follows we explore how their individual and group experiences contributed to creative learning, allowing them to take risks, generate new knowledge and communicate their understanding to new audiences (Spendlove and Wyse, 2008).

#### ***Individual Creativity and Reflection***

The impact of the module upon the students was demonstrated in their reflective journals, in which we had asked them to make connections between their deliberate learning through lectures and wider reading, the progress of their group work, and their more informal encounters with music. This style of writing was quite unfamiliar to the students and some took to it with greater ease than others, capturing moments of understanding that might otherwise not have been revealed in essays or class discussions:

I don't class myself as a musician, as for me, I never knew there was another way – I just assumed everyone's parents got their guitars out before breakfast – and so I never made the choice to be musical, it just happened. (Anna's journal, April 2013)

Other students found the journal writing more challenging, sometimes missing weeks or making a very formal entry that resisted the invitation to be reflective:

Having decided on our group aims and objectives last week we split the workload into more manageable tasks for individuals of the group to carry out. I think this will work well as everyone now [has] a specific task in relation to the larger project. (Jo's journal, February 2013)

Students occasionally used the journal as a 'cry for help', commenting on group dynamics that were becoming hard to manage, or personal difficulties with workload or anxiety in this or other modules. Responses of this nature raised questions over who the students perceived their audience to be: writing at once for feedback, future assessment, and their own reflective learning clearly presented some challenges in finding an authentic 'voice' with which each student felt comfortable. Other authors have noted similarly that obligatory reflection brings with it some paradoxes that not all students will readily resolve (Conway et al., 2012). Few students commented on this in our survey, but amongst the broader responses were some acknowledgements that keeping a journal had been a useful learning tool that might be taken forward into future modules (see also Absalom and De Saint Léger, 2011).

There was agreement amongst our survey respondents that the module had been ‘reflective’, although this was set in the context of general agreement with most of the words we had offered to describe the module. While some students made selections from the list provided, most retained nearly all of the twelve suggested descriptions, as shown in **Table 1:**

**Table 1: Words chosen to describe the student experience (with responses out of 7)**

Enterprising (5)	Problem-solving (5)	Outward-looking (5)	Individual (2)
Challenging (6)	Creative (5)	Engaging (5)	Difficult (4)
Reflective (6)	Group-focused (6)	Problematic (4)	Collaborative (7)

The only surprise here is the low rating for ‘individual’ experience, given that the majority of the assessment was for individual work. The group work and collaborative nature of the module appear to have dominated these respondents’ overall experience, and our attempts to include individual and collective learning in the module had perhaps resulted more in an overloading of experience and assessment, rather than the balance we had hoped for. Claire’s survey response confirmed this with the comment that there were ‘quite a lot of different tasks going on at the same time’. However, individual learning and self-discovery were evident in the students’ journals and survey responses, where they expressed new realisations about themselves, their possible careers or their intentions to participate in community music in the future:

I feel that I have learnt not to worry about a situation before it has even happened. I have also become more aware of my own anxieties and feel I can now be prepared in managing my own enthusiasm and opinions within a group context. (Beth’s journal, February 2013)

The first lecture was actually quite emotional for me as it was the first time I realised that I could have a future doing something that heavily involved both people and music in such a positive way. (Fiona's survey response, February 2015)

The students' multiple descriptions of the kind of learning they had experienced (Table 1) were confirmed in their comments about how the connection between the module and the wider community had made their learning feel more 'real' or significant – described by Fiona as coming out of the 'book bubble' of student life:

Felt more empowered in learning, the responsibility of a project and contact with professionals motivates me more because it feels more geared towards a professional application of learning and it makes my contributions feel more valuable. (Claire's survey response, May 2013)

The Music in the Community module has definitely got me thinking more about my academic work, how different points relate to each other and how actually everything studied can help out somewhere else in the degree. (Jo's survey response, May 2013)

Liz Mellor has reported similar blurring of boundaries between academic and applied learning in her teaching of community music modules, as students 'acknowledge their developing skills of social and musical flexibility across a variety of settings' (2011: 271). These reflections on

finding relationships between and beyond modules are a reminder that learning in HEIs can be a disjointed experience, for which reflective learning provides a partial solution:

Higher education socializes individuals to view time and process in the same way that it socializes them to view and understand knowledge – as cumulative or linear bricks in a wall rather than as nesting and interacting frameworks coexisting in creative interaction. [...] Altering one's approach to incorporate an awareness of the present moment radically changes the lens through which one views the world. (Rogers, 2001: 53)

Students in university music departments are expected to make connections between their instrumental lessons and their academic learning, and their degree studies and their wider identities as musicians and young adults (Pitts, 2003). The reflective journals – and indeed the post-module survey – appear to have heightened students' awareness of those connections, offering them a tool for assessing their own learning and considering its relevance for their current and future lives.

### ***Group Creativity and Collaboration***

Working in groups brought particular challenges to the students, and we engaged with these through sessions dedicated to exploring theoretically how groups function and mapping individual's roles within their specific group. In week two, we used Belbin Team Role theory (2015) to discuss how teams are made of different people adopting different roles: following use of Belbin's chart demonstrating contribution and allowable weaknesses for each role, we asked students to individually identify themselves as one of the nine 'roles' (plant, co-ordinator, shaper,

monitor evaluator, teamworker, implementer, completer finisher, specialist), and plotted these on a wheel grouped under Social, Thinking and Action. The group could then identify any potential gaps in their natural collective leaning, and work constructively and consciously to address this. This had an additional impact of encouraging students to assign leaders and set task responsibilities at the start of the project. For some this was a useful managerial device, and led to further reflection on their own learning and behaviour:

I learnt new skills regarding ways to work around naturally domineering people. (Anna's survey response, May 2013)

I have learnt about myself as a part of a group and what my strengths and weaknesses are. I have learnt not to try and control a group work situation – to take a step back and trust others. (Beth's survey response, May 2013)

Group-work analysis was revisited half way through the module, with a conflict resolution and team building exercise, the 'four word build', an exercise supplied by the University of Sheffield Enterprise Centre. This involved each member of the group choosing four words they felt best defined their project. In pairs, these were discussed and the total of eight words reduced to an agreed selection of four. This process occurred twice more, until each group had a set of four words that were then read out to the whole class, as the distillation of each group's thinking about its project work. While this was useful for focusing the attention of the group on each contributor's understandings and the necessity to have a group consensus, the more powerful impact came when we asked everyone to reflect silently on the process of the exercise. How

many of their words made it to the final cut? Was this because they were the best words, or because they argued loudest? How well did they consider other people's ideas? If their ideas did not make the cut, why did they not shout up more? This was a powerful moment, as the students were being asked to consider specific behaviour rather than a preconceived idea of how they think they work – a challenge beyond classifying themselves in a Belbin team role.

### *Communicating Creativity*

In addition to the challenges of group dynamics and function, communication between the students and the community partners was another area of potential tension. This communication occurred as a three-stage process, shifting the information transfer power from partner to student as the projects developed. In the first instance the partners visited the university to introduce their organisations and the briefs. At stage two, the students met with the partners in the community contexts to answer student-generated enquiries. In the third stage the students reported their findings to the partners on university premises, but away from the weekly classroom, through a presentation given in the University of Sheffield Enterprise Centre.

Reaching out beyond their group of peers, the students also connected with communities in Sheffield, in several cases approaching the client brief by investigating existing musical provision in the city, and finding a world of community choirs, active amateur musicians and resourceful musical projects that often remains hidden to students:

Being able to work with and being given a serious project with organisations outside of the uni ... the module felt like it made a real impact rather than just being theoretical.  
(Beth's survey response, May 2013)

Awareness of the impact of their research shifted the students' focus from the generic to the targeted:

We need to ensure that we tailor our work towards Learn for Life's specific needs and not just come up with a generic idea that will not be feasible...We need to ensure that the information we have gathered is useful. (Beth's journal, April 2013)

The students' concern that their research should be targeted to the partners' needs meant that each group wanted to speak with the partners to clarify their projects and gather data about the organisations. In all cases, this took longer than the students wished to come to fruition, and in one instance there was no mid-point communication between the students and the partner. This was a source of stress for the students:

This week has been quite trying, not in terms of group work, just in terms of the logistics of working with a charity. We have found that ... we may need to factor in a lengthy period for them to reply to us. (Beth's journal, February 2013)

I would have liked the partners to have collaborated with us, as we were not sure if we were heading in the right direction a lot of the time, and it would have been great to be able to contact them more easily. (Anna's survey response, May 2013)

While many students found this frustrating, it gave them a very real experience of interacting with professionals conducting varied types of work within the community, and helped them place their own projects within the work-scape of our partners' wider obligations. It also gave them the experience of taking ownership of their ideas, working independently, translating the brief in their own ways and having to make autonomous judgements on whether their ideas 'fit the brief'. This differs considerably from the majority of their other modules, where assignment guidelines and marking rubrics are focused inward, on the learning objectives and criteria of the degree, rather than out towards the wider application of newly generated knowledge. However, for one dissatisfied student, this emphasis on the needs of the community partners did not meet his expectations of the module:

I presumed we would be actively taking part in a community project, or at least gaining first hand experience. It kind of felt like we were just evaluating work that had already been done. (Edward's survey response, February 2015)

Edward's response shows an expectation that practical, musical creativity would be at the heart of the module, and suggests that we had not made our focus on developing the impact of pre-existing musical skills sufficiently clear (at least to him). More explicit theorising of the creative applications of musical knowledge could have helped to address this more directly – as indeed would a longer-term connection with the community partners, in which students voluntarily implemented some of their ideas beyond the scope of the module.

In the final stages of the module the students presented their findings back to the community partners. While they were universally met with enthusiasm and gratitude, so

fulfilling the definition of creative learning which emphasises ‘outcomes which are judged by appropriate observers to be original and of value’ (Spendlove and Wyse, 2008: 14), there were also instances where criticisms of existing practices were presented. It was interesting to us as tutors to see the students alter their appreciation of the anonymity of academic study: while they typically write their thoughts in essays only accessed by a supportive tutor, here they were openly criticising the working practice of people they had been closely working with for the previous three months. The desire to achieve a good module mark meant they sought creative and dramatic recommendations; however, these were not always realistic to the circumstance, and some reports were a hybrid mix of community-based research and rather more speculative ideas, intended to meet the perceived assessment aims of the module.

Our chosen forms of assessment differed from those of other modules that the students had previously experienced. This caused anxieties for some students and was a potential barrier to participating in the module for Anna – she chose to persevere, but this could have influenced other students’ decisions not to engage:

Not being heavily essay based did put me off initially, as I now that is where my strengths lie (and I HATE GROUP WORK), and in addition to this, not having done any presentations before I was unsure of how well I could do in the assessment. (Anna’s survey response, May 2013)

Anna was not alone in her insecurities about how the group work and presentation would affect her assessment, and students appeared to feel a lack of clear measurement of their progress, despite our provision of ongoing feedback through mentoring of the group work and

commenting on individual reflective journals and draft essays. Previous studies have shown that students favour continual assessment of their development through a module (Rees, 2007), with this approach making little difference to the final marks but providing a stronger sense of progress. In future versions of this module, we might need to think further about how to balance the genuine uncertainties of the community partnerships with the students' anxieties about their learning and assessment. Tackling this dilemma more directly would allow us – and the students – to embrace the riskiness of the module activities more wholeheartedly, avoiding the danger of limiting creative learning by 'the safe production of predictable rather than creative outcomes' (Spendlove and Wyse, 2008: 15).

The students' work was warmly received by the community partners, with great value placed upon their contributions, while remaining sensitive towards the limitations of their expertise and available time. For Beth, identifying as a student had a profound impact as she more deeply considered her place in the world as others might see her:

Jill (from Learn for Life) had pointed out that whilst we were using labels [to describe mental health service users], people also label students with negative connotations... This experience made me more aware of how we describe and discuss people who are not the same as ourselves for whatever reason. I have become more aware of how I come across to people and how the student population as a whole is perceived by the outer world.

(Beth's journal, May 2013)

## **Conclusions**

The opportunity to reflect in this chapter on the enterprising and creative processes of this module has highlighted some features of learning music in higher education that have potentially wider implications. The combination of group work and individual reflection, for example, has illustrated how personal, social and musical development are intertwined in meaningful musical learning, as our students applied their skills in new contexts and reflected on those processes in their journals. Working as a group, and representing their group in communication with the community partners, required the students to situate their own learning in a broader context, in ways that seemed valuable to them, if sometimes challenging or frustrating. Some made discoveries about potential future career directions, while all confronted their own strengths and weaknesses as learners and group members, in ways that could have an impact on their life and learning choices. Additionally, they gained a sense of how their student identity connects with musical life outside the university, so broadening their sense of how and where community music activity flourishes. These connections from self to group to community can sometimes be lacking in higher education, and while they might not have a place in every module, their stronger presence in university music departments could be beneficial for staff, students and community partners alike.

The module design and aims engaged us in creative processes as lecturers, both in designing the module to include genuine risk and exploration of real world challenges, and in embracing ideas of reflective and collaborative learning. It is reassuring to find in the research literature that we are not the first to note the increase in staff time and commitment needed to run a module of this kind (e.g. Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003). Reviewing his module on ‘history in the community’, Winstanley observes that ‘demands made by students are less predictable in terms of their timing and nature, as well as being more emotionally and intellectually

challenging' (1992: 62). The students' learning experiences in our module were much more visible to us than in a traditional lecture format, as we engaged with them in discussions of the progress of the group work, and responded to their weekly reflections on their learning, reading and thinking. Our uncertainties and 'in the moment' responses will have been more visible to them too, requiring a mutual re-thinking of the academic's role that could usefully have been explored more deeply or overtly. Such an approach offers one form of resistance to the notion of 'student as consumer' (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion, 2009) by positioning knowledge as a form of co-production between learners, teachers and community partners, and highlighting the different needs and doubts that each party brings to the process of education.

Each partner has so far been involved for one project each, with the first year's two partners acting primarily as traditional consultant employees setting a brief and receiving the results. Heeley Development Trust, however, has expressed a desire to have a future cohort revisit the organisation and monitor the impact of the changes applied from our students' recent recommendations. This suggests an ongoing relationship between the partner and the university beyond that particular student group, following a pattern close to an 'action research' cycle, whereby hypotheses are applied and evaluated in practice, adapted and reapplied (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010). By setting briefs, supporting research and implementing findings, our partners are interacting with our students to produce new knowledge about their organisations and ways of working. This blurs the boundaries between the established academic institution and the field, placing the partners as collaborators in the process – co-teachers, co-researchers and co-producers of knowledge (Lassiter and Campbell, 2010).

So what next for Music in the Community? In future versions of the module, we will need to think further about the clarity of our objectives, finding the balance between learning

about community music and learning how to learn. We have also noted the students' appetite for practical training in community music delivery, currently addressed through extra-curricular activities such as our student-led Music in the City volunteering programme. We have seen the potential for students to make links between different aspects of their learning and, more significantly, between their degree and their future career plans. The students' practical engagement in the community offered opportunities to see themselves as creative practitioners in the wider world, building connections between their current experiences and those of the partners and visiting lecturers. Longer-term engagement with the partners could help see some of these projects realised in practice, so offering scope for another cycle of creative and reflective learning, with potential benefits for students and community groups alike. In this exploratory attempt to place creativity and community at the heart of students' learning in this module, we have exposed some of the conflicts and challenges that underpin these approaches, but also highlighted the potential for building communities of practice that include us, our students, and the wider musical world.

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