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‘Common Ground’: Co-facilitators’ Perspectives on Music Workshops for Refugees and Asylum Seekers

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ABSTRACT

This article adds to the body of research on music and arts work with refugee and asylum seeker communities, investigating the shared leadership experiences of two co-facilitators who led ten music workshops and an informal sharing session which took place in York, UK. Qualitative data from the facilitators were collected through semi-structured interviews, asynchronous interviews, and reflective diary entries. Thematic analysis led to considerations of the co-facilitators’ approach and preparation which concern adaptability and flexibility, the concept of sharing to support unity and growth through active participation, singing as a facilitative tool, and the navigation of challenges. These reflect their development, priorities, and concerns. The findings evidenced that these workshops represented an opportunity for professional growth for the two facilitators, through the development of skills such as flexibility and adaptability. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to contribute to the workshops by sharing songs or dances from their own country, which fostered a more equal sense of status. Suggestions for further research concern facilitation training, particularly the consideration of cross-cultural communication, professional values and competencies, and further explanation of strategies supporting individual and collaborative growth.

KEYWORDS

Facilitation; music workshops; community music; asylum seekers; refugees

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INTRODUCTION

Displacement, disruption and daunting demands are themes widely acknowledged in literature on refugees and asylum seekers. The most recent figures from the United Nations Refugee Agency state that at the end of 2024, "123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced" due to "persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order (UNHCR, 2025). For these refugees, including a steadily rising number of women and children, many challenges have been identified concerning the psychological friction of "nonbelonging" within a new environment (Reyes, 2010, p. 127). In the community music literature, van der Merwe and Morelli (2022) contend that "when we cooperate during community musicking, we start to experience a sense of long-term belonging" (p. 7) — or, as Odendaal (2021) says, we find a "musical home" (p. 8). Millar and Warwick (2019) consider the impact of musical activities on the wellbeing of refugees, specifically focusing on ways these activities may develop "hope and possibility" (p. 68). Increased confidence is demonstrated through the improvisation workshops studied by Vougioukalou *et al*. (2019) in which "innovative cross-cultural pieces" (p. 533) created by participants received positive audience responses. Similarly, in the work of Kenny (2022), Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem (2023), and Weston and Lenette (2016), integrated music and movement activities were underpinned by an ethos of caring, sensitivity and commitment to co-creation, suggesting that this foundational combination may support active participation and enhance shared experiences.

FACILITATION IN COMMUNITY MUSIC GROUPS

Community music literature emphasises the importance of facilitation skills to underpin processes "encouraging open dialogue among different individuals with differing perspectives" (Higgins, 2012, p. 147). These processes enable "participants' creative energy to flow, develop, and grow through pathways specific to individuals and the groups in which they are working" (ibid., p. 148). This approach welcomes uncertainty and unpredictability, with facilitators able to operate fluidly as necessary between guiding or holding back, being open to varied dynamics between individuals, musical material, and concerns of product, process and shared ownership within a space that embraces "risk and undecidability" (Higgins, 2012, p. 154). As well as including creative process-based approaches building on participants' interests and ideas, utilising musical and interactive social abilities to create and develop group aims (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018), the accounts from facilitators cited by Higgins (2012) further indicate the imperative for facilitators to know and understand participants as people, with the aim of creating and maintaining supportive, respectful and trusting relationships.

Practitioners working with refugees and asylum seekers highlight further the facilitator's need for flexibility, empathy, the value of non-verbal communication, ability to deal with participant non-attendance and the importance of considering facilitator/participant expectations, status and power dynamics arising from their different positions and backgrounds (Kenny, 2022). Hassler, cited in Burnard *et al.* (2018, p. 234), notes the importance of the facilitator's ability to "honor all participants, whatever their level of musical competence" in order to enable the growth of individuals and of the group; sensitivity to individuals' backgrounds, circumstances, stress and trauma is also vital. Furthermore, facilitators need to support their own mental wellbeing in light of working in very challenging circumstances (Lenette and Procopis, 2016; Kenny, 2022).

Currently, there is scant literature on co-facilitation within this context, or concerning the mechanisms for co-facilitator training. Renshaw stated that "Facilitating is a dynamic, non-directive way of generating a conversation aimed at enabling or empowering a person(s) to take responsibility for their own learning and practice" (2009, p. 62). This could apply not only to a facilitator/workshop participant relationship, but also to the musical and process-reflection aspects of the conversation between co-facilitators, supporting their delivery and ongoing development. With regard to co-leadership, both co-leaders "need to be aware of the contribution of the other, value this, and believe in it" (Benson, 2019, p. 34), being clear about their individual roles and contributions, the aims of the group, and willing to "permit and invite differences in perception, style, and approach, as long as there is agreement about purpose" (ibid.). In Benson's model of "collaborative co-leading", responsibility is jointly shared for planning and for delivery, with advantages including more varied perspectives and approaches than if led by one individual, creating "healthy and creative difference" as the "lived experience" (Benson, 2019, p. 37). This may be particularly relevant in the intercultural domain of the music workshop for refugees and asylum seekers, a space that affords the possibility of exploring "identities, and modes of expression", and "practices of making and creating", which can support "awareness, dialogue, or understanding across contexts" (Burnard *et al.*, 2018, p. 229). Significantly, Burnard *et al.* (2018) position intercultural creativity as entailing "non-hierarchical and intersubjective relationships" involving "the feeling of 'respect', 'belonging', or 'inclusion'" (p. 231). Notably, inviting contributions of shared musical material from group members may further require facilitators to have an empathic mindset and support reflection on the demands placed on participants as the facilitators experience a reversal of being in the position of holding privileged knowledge in the workshop setting. Gibson (2020) observes a risk of the domination of the facilitator's musical material and processes, highlighting the need to consider notions of ownership, quality and agency. These insights indicate valuable understandings of facilitation, yet there is scope to expand awareness of the practices underpinning workshop facilitation demonstrated through the focus of this research: shared leadership in workshops with refugee and asylum seekers. In this context, what are the primary concerns of the facilitators, and how might their joint approaches inspire and support the collaboration of participants?

Background and Project Aims

Our project involved music workshops for the refugee and asylum-seeker community in York, UK. This region has a large population of refugees and asylum seekers (Migration Yorkshire, 2024). We received funding from York Cultural Wellbeing Grants 2023 (Make It York & City of York Council) and were supported by Refugee Action York, York City of Sanctuary and Refugee Council UK to provide ten music workshops, each led by two facilitators, over a six-month period (October 2023-March 2024), culminating in an informal sharing event. The workshops were promoted to potential attendees through relevant agencies who distributed posters and mentioned the opportunity during Welcome Café events and language classes; information was also distributed by the University of York and York St John University to Sanctuary students and staff. Our facilitators promoted the workshops at events organised by Refugee Action York; we also met potential participants and support workers at a Welcome Café and shared information about our project. We promoted the workshops as "a means to explore music as a way to express ourselves creatively, looking at identity and musical traditions" (poster

content), and aimed to create opportunities for the development of personal/group growth, belonging and wellbeing.

At the time of the workshops, the facilitators — Mia and Sophia (pseudonyms), two white females in their twenties — had completed their undergraduate studies in music at a UK university. Specialising in string instruments and voice, they both had previous experience of leading workshops but had no prior experience of working with refugee and asylum seekers. Mia had led workshops in schools and care homes. Sophia had facilitated some workshops with children in primary schools, and with babies. In addition, she had contributed to the creation of a music festival within a community of people from different cultural backgrounds.

21 people aged 4-70+ from four countries (Afghanistan, Romania, Tunisia and Ukraine) took part in the workshops, with varying attendance patterns due to their other commitments and transport availability; most participants were adults, although some children attended with one or more family members on some occasions. Over 30 people, including participants and audience, attended the sharing event; the workshops were also supported by members from Refugee Council UK, Refugee Action York, who observed/participated, and three University of York Music students (MEG – Music Education Group) who joined in with music-making and had opportunities to input into the workshop content and direction. The authors also attended, joining in with musical activities and talking to participants in the tea breaks as well as welcoming them and guiding them to the workshop room within the venue.

Before each workshop, the two facilitators created session plans outlining in bullet points the session aims and objectives, potential content, extended activities, backup alternatives, session materials, and provisional indication of which of them would lead specific sections within the workshop. These plans were shared within the team to gather feedback on their feasibility and to receive suggestions for further content. The workshops primarily focused on music-making through singing and hand-percussion, a keyboard, and in one session, ukuleles; they also integrated dance, poetry, creative writing and artwork created collaboratively and/or individually by the participants and/or facilitators. The facilitators played violin, viola and bouzouki in addition to singing. A whiteboard supported the communication of musical material and song lyrics, and a speaker was used to play recordings (material created by the participants during workshops, and songs mentioned by participants).

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Our research operates within an interpretative paradigm, within which researchers investigate the subjective meanings of human experience (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018). This choice was made to capture the facilitators' unique experiences and explore how their individual and collective approaches to facilitation may provide further insights into working with people coming from migration contexts. While this current study does not seek to generalise findings to a larger population – acknowledging the specificity of our research context – we will nevertheless consider broader implications to inform further practice and research.

Following discussion with the facilitators about the possibilities of the project and the suggested modes of data collection, ethical approval was gained from the University of York Arts and Humanities Ethics committee, and the workshop facilitators completed an informed consent process. Qualitative data were then

collected through three types of data collection: semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007), asynchronous interviews (Ratislavová and Ratislav, 2014), and reflective diaries (Phelps, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were the primary means of data collection. First, an interview schedule was developed by two members of the research team. This was subsequently reviewed by the third researcher for additional validation. Questions probed facilitators' workshop leading experience, their motivations to facilitate these workshops, the strategies employed to overcome potential challenges, and the dynamics of co-facilitation. Two of the researchers then conducted individual interviews with the facilitators; these were around halfway through our project, after the sixth workshop. The interviews were audio-recorded, uploaded to a password-protected Google Drive folder, and transcribed verbatim by the two researchers. The transcripts were then sent via email to the interviewees for review.

At the end of the project (March 2024), additional insights into the last four workshops and informal sharing performance were sought from the facilitators through follow-up questions, emailed to them. Although a second interview could have proved useful, we opted for this form of asynchronous interviewing, where written information is exchanged between the researcher and the interviewer via email rather than in real-time (Ratislavová and Ratislav, 2014), to give facilitators the opportunity for introspection at their own pace, especially considering that the follow-up questions explored material from the shared transcripts. In addition, data from the facilitators' reflective diaries, maintained from the start of the project, afforded further nuanced insights into their facilitation experiences.

A reflexive deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was initially conducted to analyse the semi-structured and asynchronous interview data. The free data analysis software QualCoder (Brailas, Tragou, and Papachristopoulos, 2023) was used to analyse the interview data, which were coded and categorised into themes and subthemes. A review process followed, in which codes, themes, and subthemes were validated and/or challenged by the research team. Following a similar approach, the reflective diaries were thematically analysed. The data analyses were then triangulated to enable a comprehensive comparison of shared themes and insights, enriching the overall data analysis process and subsequent examination of the findings. Illustrative quotations from the interviews and reflective diaries exemplify the themes and subthemes extracted from the data analysis, adding depth and authenticity to the findings and supporting understanding of the facilitation process and its perceived impact on participants' engagement. Given our involvement as researchers and attendees of the workshops, we held regular team meetings to reflect critically on our experiences, assumptions, and beliefs underpinning the research project, a process enabling navigation of interwoven intersubjective aspects (Finlay, 2002). These proved valuable both in the data analysis process and in the interpretation of the findings as we were able to relate these findings to the particular context in which the workshops had been conducted, thus contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play in the workshop leading.

Emergent Themes and Discussions

This section presents and discusses the following themes identified in the data analysis: adaptability and flexibility, sharing, the value of singing, and navigating through challenges. These themes offer a nuanced exploration of the facilitators' approaches to the workshops and their underlying motivations, beliefs, values, and reasons guiding their facilitatory decisions. The analysis delineates the multifaceted

nature of the workshops, showing how they fostered participant engagement, cultural exchange, and facilitators' personal and professional growth through co-leadership.

1. Exploring Planning and Facilitation: Adaptability and Flexibility

The facilitators were invited to talk about their experiences with workshop planning and facilitation. Both shared insights into their co-facilitator roles, joint planning and initial approaches, which were considered as complementary and adaptable. Mia emphasised their collaborative approach: "We're quite good at sharing things out as well and thinking about who's doing what even if we haven't talked about it". On the other hand, Sophia did not "think that [these roles] are fixed", indicating a fluidity in their responsibilities and a willingness to adapt as needed.

Both facilitators noted a tendency towards rigidity during the early stages of the project, which stemmed from uncertainties surrounding participant numbers and responses to the workshops, as well as their limited confidence and experience in facilitating workshops with refugees and asylum seekers. As Sophia reflected:

> I think at the beginning we were less confident and less experienced and so we wanted to stick more rigidly to the structure that we had planned because there were so many unknowns, I suppose, in how people would respond and how long it would take to do each thing, and how it would kind of flow naturally into everything.

Mia echoed this feeling, expressing worries about managing potential moments of silence: "Definitely before the first session everything was quite rigidly prepared in the sense that there was a fear that there would just be silence". As the sessions progressed, Sophia and Mia noted an increase in their confidence, leading to a more flexible approach to facilitation and an ability to deal with unexpected situations. For example, Sophia said that "with experience, it's been easier just to allow things to happen in the session that were unplanned".

The flexible nature of the workshops and the importance of accepting any potential deviations from an initial plan emerged from the data. Sophia noted: "what we've learnt more recently is that even if we plan ideas and activities into a session and structure, how we feel that that might go when it actually comes to the session and it goes completely differently, that's okay". This adaptability enabled facilitators to prioritise participant engagement, as Mia expressed: "we started off on our plan and then someone wanted to share something and we've taken that and either put it with something from another session or something that's not in the plan". Such openness to spontaneity is also reflected in the facilitators' reflective diaries. For example, Sophia wrote: "[In workshop four] we ended up straying far away from our plan, as per usual, which has been a good learning curve!". Reflecting on this experience in her post-interview comments, she emphasised that "a key takeaway [of this project] is to never underestimate the potential for ideas or unexpected beauty to evolve through leaving a space open and unplanned", which highlights the transformative nature of the workshops, leading to perceived professional growth.

A reflective approach to planning, which took into account participants' interests and desires, was believed to be strategically effective. Sophia described how they had considered "what worked in the last session, what people enjoyed, if there was anything that they said they would bring to the next session". This indicated that a responsive approach to workshop planning and facilitation was fundamental to supporting an inclusive environment in which "participants just enjoy being with each other in that moment" (Sophia), and "you realise all of us are just people and

all of us have this common interest in music which is really nice and exciting and immediately can bring you together" (Mia).

1A. Discussion: Adaptability and Flexibility - Workshop Planning and Facilitation

Findings showed a relevant evolution in the session facilitators' approach to workshop planning throughout the project. Their initial rigid approach to planning, outlined by Mia's perceived need for the plan to be "well-rehearsed" — i.e. carefully prepared with pre-determined actions accurately planned — shifted progressively into a more flexible and open approach as their confidence increased. This change in their planning approach provided participants with more opportunities to influence the direction of the workshop, transforming the nature of the workshop into a collaborative endeavour between the facilitators and the participants, in alignment with the findings of Vougioukalou *et al.* (2019). Consequently, roles within the workshop became more fluid, with facilitators and participants alternately taking on the roles of co-participants and co-facilitators.

As the workshops progressed both Mia and Sophia began to work together in a more collaborative manner, an approach that on some occasions blurred the lines of their individual responsibilities. This strategy improved their adaptability to specific contingencies, a quality recognised by research as a strength of collaborative teaching (Fennick and Liddy, 2001; Nevin, Thousand, and Villa, 2009). Consistent with studies indicating flexibility as a tool utilised by other facilitators of workshops for refugees and asylum seekers (Kenny, 2022; Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem, 2023), as well as a skill that is commonly demonstrated by expert music teachers (Johnson and Matthews, 2017) and community music workshop leaders (Bartleet and Higgins, 2018), with planning being a common concern among less experienced teachers (Powell, 2014), these findings show that cultivating flexibility in workshop planning not only enhances the quality of the workshops but also aligns with the developmental trajectory observed in professional domains other than facilitating, such as music education teaching. Therefore, the development of flexibility is key for facilitators and educators working in these settings. It could be argued, indeed, that the necessity of responding to participants' inputs in unpredictable circumstances (Timonen, Houmann, and Sæther, 2020) had positive implications for the facilitators' professional development by equipping them with essential skills to effectively support the needs of vulnerable groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, within a workshop setting (Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem, 2023). In addition, the presence of two co-facilitators, along with participants observing their growth, is likely to inspire and benefit workshop attendees by providing them with exposure to diverse perspectives and facilitation styles, thus fostering a rich, open and dynamic environment.

2. Examining the Role of Sharing in Workshop Dynamics

A common theme derived from the data analysis of the interviews and the reflective diaries reveals the ethos of the workshop as a space for participants to share their cultural heritage and personal interests through artistic expression (e.g. music, dance, hand-held percussion instruments). The facilitators' deliberate approach to cultivating this ethos reflected their commitment to fostering a sense of sharing among participants. As Mia described:

> I think an important aspect of the sessions is to allow people to share music from their culture and country or just what they like! […] When we were

> talking about setting up the project […] we wanted the space of sharing. […] We really liked the aspect of just being able to bring something that you like and share it with the room and then people adding ideas or bouncing off it. So that was really important when we were thinking about creating the sessions.

This participant-led approach to planning and facilitation and the participants' active contributions fostered a perceived sense of agency, self-expression, community, and cultural exchange. Sophia, for example, described how the workshops may have proven to nurture a sense of growth, as evidenced by one of the participants enthusiastically sharing their dances within the group:

> It's been interesting to learn different dance styles from different countries and how often the idea of group dancing is actually very similar between countries. And [dancing] has definitely empowered — definitely one of the participants in particular — and [they] danced a lot and [they] really enjoyed teaching us her dance style.

Another example of increased confidence was observed in one of the participants who, despite initial apprehension, wanted to share their individual music learning with the group: "[They were] a little bit nervous, but actually just happy to play all the way through that Bach[1]. That was like a 'Wow, there's been a real development here from when we first met you'" (Mia). However, although other factors may have contributed to the participant's increased confidence, Mia also noted that the transformative effect of collaborative music making was evident throughout the workshops:

> It's been really lovely to see just how much more confident [one participant] has grown. In my view other things are contributing in between sessions as well, like maybe [they are] having some English lessons and all of this kind of thing, but it's really demonstrated that making music together has made a difference in terms of [their] confidence.

Interestingly, this positive outcome was deemed to be the result of a team effort, which highlights the collaborative commitment to creating a safe and supportive environment for personal growth and satisfaction:

> I've been really happy with how everyone's just been so happy to share, and I think between all of us, not just me personally, but between all of us, we and the participants as well we've managed to create an environment where people are just really happy to share things together. (Mia)

This collective sharing of music and dance was considered to bring a sense of unity and positivity within the group, as Mia highlighted in her reflective diary:

> The level of openness to sharing song and dance and the positivity and energy with which this was done, particularly once we had got the music going, took me by surprise. We were a group of people who had never gathered together before and had come from very different days, weeks, personalities, ages and backgrounds and yet the making of music together so playfully and joyfully from the offset established an amazing sense of positive energy and connection.

[1] The facilitator was referring to a workshop attendee playing a composition by the German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) on a digital keyboard.

Tea and coffee breaks during each session also contributed "to a sense of community and togetherness" (Mia) and sparked musical ideas to explore in the workshops. As Sophia noted:

> Many of the most interesting conversations we've had with the participants have come over that break […] It can just be a totally unrelated conversation which then often links back to some kind of musical idea or something that will remind them of a song that they thought they would teach us.

This further highlights the emerging nature of the workshops as dynamic spaces where active participation and sharing served as a catalyst for growth, ultimately contributing to a perceived shared purpose among all involved. In turn, this dynamic environment emphasises the need for exploring the narratives that underlie co-facilitation processes at the heart of these workshops.

2a. Discussion: Sharing - Unity and Growth through Active Participation

Our findings demonstrate individual development and collaborative participation and an attitude of openness from both facilitators and participants which supports and sustains a sense of community, engagement and participation. In many ways, the workshops were intended by the facilitators as a performative space where participants could share their cultural heritage through artistry. Notably, Sophia's observation that "It's been interesting to learn different dance styles from different countries" seems to address a specific social dynamic where Mia and Sophia transitioned from their role as facilitators to that of learners, potentially indicating a status shift where roles became blurred. This emerged as a defining feature of the workshops; indeed, it encouraged a shared exchange of roles which enabled the co-creation of artistic material by both facilitators and participants. In this sense, the workshops represented "a space for cultural dialogue" (Weston and Lenette, 2016, p. 125) that promoted a sense of inclusion among participants and facilitators through cultural responsiveness (Sæther, 2021). The establishment of such space may have been possible due to non-hierarchical dynamics (Burnard *et al.*, 2018) where facilitators alternated between leading the workshop and encouraging participants to assume a leading role through their contributions. Sophia emphasised this collaborative interplay of roles, noting the sense of growth that emerged when participants took on leadership by teaching others, specifically through dance. In addition, it is critical to note that such blurring of the roles was not incidental or occasional; rather, providing space for participants to share their cultural heritage was an intentional and structural aspect of all the workshops, aligning this study with the ethos of workshop delivery in research by Millar and Warwick (2019) and Weston and Lenette (2016). While the insights and reflective diaries of the facilitators mainly uncovered aspects connected to participants' engagement and artistic outcomes, it might be speculated that these outcomes have impacted the development of the facilitators' artistry; notably, at least one study — Lenette and Procopis (2016) — found that facilitating similar workshops had a positive influence on the musicianship of one facilitator. Future research could explore the implications of engaging in artistic workshops for the facilitators' personal artistic growth.

The workshops created agency for participants' decision-making, a concept that has been explored by several studies investigating the facilitation of workshops for asylum seekers (Kenny, 2022; Marsh, 2017; Millar and Warwick, 2019; Weston and Lenette, 2016). The creation of such a sense of agency is particularly relevant in relation to the specific context in which it takes place, as noted by Storsve, Westbye, and Ruud (2010): the authors suggest that the development of a sense of

agency is particularly important for people who live in circumstances where they have limited agency — as is the case for asylum seekers, who are in most cases members of an accidental community born of "an element of indeterminacy that has accidentally brought people together" (Weston and Lenette, 2016, p. 124). It thus appears that such an approach is likely to be highly functional and beneficial to increase participants' sense of wellbeing, at least within the context of the workshop where fluidity of roles allowed them to actively co-create artistic material together with the facilitators, corroborating findings from this study with those of Weston and Lenette (2016). As highlighted in the findings of the current study, space for agency was not only created in relation to the group but also to individual participants, which may have enabled growth in their confidence and wellbeing benefits. Likewise, the facilitators' comments seem to indicate that witnessing the growth in confidence of individual participants has been a deeply rewarding experience. It follows that nurturing a positive environment where individual participants feel valued and encouraged to share their artistic pursuits may be as equally important as achieving artistic outcomes collectively, as this study has demonstrated. While other studies have primarily investigated artistic workshops as a collective experience for participants (Lenette and Procopis, 2016; Millar and Warwick, 2019; Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem, 2023), future research might explore how progress and growth of individual participants may contribute to the development of a sense of achievement and motivation within the group.

3. Investigating the Value of Singing

As mentioned previously, a key focus of the workshops was on singing. Both facilitators shared their insights into the profound impact of singing activities, elaborating on their motivations to include these, and recalling impactful experiences from the workshops and potential challenges associated with singing in this setting.

The facilitators reflected on how they had initially been concerned to avoid including music that might "upset" participants, as Mia remarked in relation to a melancholic song like "Yesterday", by the Beatles, or a folk song, "Bella Ciao", tied to socio-political contexts which might connect to struggles experienced by attendees (e.g. a song about battles for freedom, resistance, and justice). She also added that "if you're hearing one song you might see it one way, and they might see it in a completely different way", which acknowledges the diversity of perspectives and understandings that songs can evoke across cultures. Despite this, the facilitators highlighted the inherent value of songs and singing activities, emphasising their capacity to stir emotions and foster interpersonal connections through the act of teaching and learning within such a varied group. Sophia said that "songs are very evocative" and "they're often tied to cultures, histories, and identities", adding that "the act of teaching something connects people because it's the communication of something potentially personal to someone […] especially [teaching songs] between participants, I think, that's being the most powerful rather than us".

According to the facilitators' views, singing emerged as a potentially unifying force capable of fostering a sense of togetherness across cultures. Mia highlighted the physicality of singing, noting that this creates a tangible sense of unity: "Singing is really powerful, a really powerful way of bringing people together because it comes from us [...] but [when singing] we're actually physicalising the sound so when you all make sounds together that's a really unifying and important thing". In her reflective diary, she reflected on a powerful experience in the first workshop:

> One of the most special moments of the hour and a half was the sharing of a Ukrainian folk song (at first by [four attendees] until others joined in). It was not only beautiful as a song, but the way in which it was sung was entirely different to British traditional songs and singing that I have heard. There was a depth to the sound and inflection in the language and in the singing of the language that was unexpected and, in the moment, felt emotionally powerful.

Learning songs from different cultures and languages led to over-ambitious plans from the co-facilitators in one session, and resultant feelings of discomfort; however, this may not necessarily be viewed as problematic and could be a mutually enriching learning experience, as Sophia described:

> [In] one of the most recent sessions where we had a grand idea of learning lots of different languages […] there was potentially embarrassment from us as the facilitators, which was the predominant feeling, because some of the participants just wanted to be able to learn the words. But actually that didn't really matter because ... the slightly ridiculous nature of what we were doing just broke down any kind of feeling of perfection in the room and things needing to work out. And so I think it made us facilitators more human. And I think also empowered the participants in a way […] when *they* were teaching the words in their language [emphasis added].

Mia, for example, described a series of strategies to approach singing in an accessible and inclusive way:

> When we did 'Carol of the Bells' and then added a simple bass line which is almost just sound, so if you can get people to make sound, even if it's not quite the notes, they're still part of something that's unified. And I think we also did this game when we all got up and walked around the room and made different sounds; I thought people would be really scared of that because it's quite putting yourself out there thing to just go and make noises in a room together, and actually everyone was doing something, often with that voice, sometimes with the percussion. Again, you're getting them to use their voice in a group and then once you've got them to make some sounds, transforming that into singing is just one more step.

These insights, therefore, carry important implications for cross-cultural understanding and exchange through singing in context involving refugees and asylum seekers.

3a. Discussion: The Value of Singing

By examining shared leadership practices and co-facilitators' perceptions towards singing activities, our findings offer considerations of practical facilitatory strategies that promote an accessible and supportive environment through a collaborative and inclusive approach to singing. This approach presented opportunities for growth and human connection within these workshops, contributing to a broader sense of agency among attendees.

Singing was regarded as a key focus of the workshops. As Mia noted, the facilitators were concerned about including music that may have made participants feel uncomfortable, acknowledging the potential for differing interpretations of vocal music across cultures. Nonetheless, in contrast to other projects that solely incorporated instrumental music to mitigate potential issues stemming from vocal music (Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem, 2023), facilitators in this project decided to include vocal music in light of its capacity to facilitate self-expression and

stimulate connections among participants (Welch *et al.*, 2014). It is significant, in this sense, that Mia acknowledged the sharing of a Ukrainian folk song from one of the participants as one of "the most special moments" where mutual learning took place. In this context, singing served as a genuine common ground for facilitators and participants, embodying inclusivity as it allowed everyone to contribute with their voice and facilitated the unspoken creation of a "no prior musical experience required" policy (Yerichuk and Krar, 2019) to be able to contribute actively to the workshops.

Nevertheless, the implementation of singing within the workshops did not come without challenges for the facilitators; as participants shared songs from their countries of origin, Sophia described the potential embarrassment stemming from engaging with a different language as "the predominant feeling" experienced by the two facilitators at some point, but also recognised that for the participants, this was a valuable opportunity to share their language and, by extension, their culture with the whole group. Although creating space for participants' songs was also implemented by Lenette and Procopis' (2016) study on music workshops with refugees, in our study this may have determined again a role shift fostering a more egalitarian dynamic within the workshop setting as participants took on the role of facilitators by sharing their language and providing insights into their culture. It is therefore evident that while the inclusion of singing in the workshops presented challenges for the facilitators, it also offered opportunities for collective growth and cultural exchange, outlining the transformative potential of singing in promoting cross-cultural understanding and collaboration among diverse communities.

4. Navigating Through Challenges: Insights into the Facilitation Process

The facilitators talked about the potential challenges emerging from the workshop facilitation and ways to overcome them. Language barriers were a prevalent challenge, especially in relation to the explanation of activities. For example, Sophia mentioned that "if you could call it a difficulty, just explaining things in a simple enough way that people understand or that it's come across to them" has been a challenge within some of the workshops.

However, the facilitators identified strategies through which language challenges could be resolved. Mia explained the importance of simplifying language: "trying to say things as simply as possible, so not necessarily really slowly but using as few words as possible has sometimes been useful". Most importantly, both facilitators emphasised the importance of providing different access points for attendees to engage with the different activities, especially when these contained language elements. As Sophia described: "we make sure that there is a way to participate non-verbally, so through percussion", recalling that in one workshop, "it worked quite well when we just did rhythm-based activity as well. And maybe myself and the co-facilitator would sing or play the music and everyone else would use percussion".

While potential cultural frictions were thought to be possible challenges, according to Sophia and Mia, these had not occurred. Mia noted that "in some countries there are difficulties around engaging with certain kinds of music", whereas Sophia expressed an initial concern about a "high concentration of Ukrainian refugees" in the first workshops and "whether that would make other refugees feel less comfortable being there". Both facilitators, nonetheless, observed that these cultural frictions had not "manifested at all" (Mia) and had not seemed "to have been an issue at all" (Sophia). Through their workshop delivery, the facilitators demonstrated a sense of cultural inclusivity and respectful engagement. Sophia

highlighted that they would "always plan sort of neutral activities that would be good for any person from any culture", adding that the ethos of the workshops, aimed at cross-cultural sharing and participant-led initiatives, mitigated potential frictions:

> I think, more of the participant side of things, there could have been — I don't think there's been so far — a sort of cross cultural friction, maybe. Yeah, I haven't felt that yet, and I think it's because the sessions have been very focused on sharing rather than focussing on a particular culture for one session.

In her post-interview reflection, Mia reflected on her key takeaways following the end of the project, emphasising how music could go beyond cultural and language barriers:

> Music is one of the most powerful forms of connection, communication and expression. Even in the very simple fact of being able to traverse a potential language and cultural barrier to the point where it is possible to create and share things with people you have never met before. It brings people together in such a positive way […] People might at first be uncertain to do something but receive a lot of gratification when they then manage to do it. All of the above we did throughout the project and it led to really positive outcomes for both the participants and ourselves.

This has implications for the training of music facilitators working in workshop settings with refugees and asylum seekers and highlights the importance of developing strategies prioritising cultural inclusivity, effective communication, and accessibility.

4a. Discussion: Navigating Through Challenges

The facilitators also experienced some challenges in running these workshops. Language was considered as a mild barrier to understanding; Sophia, for example, found it difficult to "explain things in a simple enough way that people understand", but providing participants with different access points to artistic initiatives within the workshops proved an effective strategy to address these issues. In addition, similarly to processes deployed in a study by Vougioukalou *et al.* (2019), musical lines were simplified by "add[ing] a simple bass line which is almost just sound" (Mia) as well including simple hand-held percussion instruments, and clapping/tapping for any participants who may not have wished to sing. These strategies offered multi-level access points for participation while at the same time providing potential for the rich layering of musical textures which may have further stimulated participants' involvement and contributed to their sense of enjoyment.

It is interesting to note that while the facilitators had anticipated potential cultural tensions, they believed that such frictions did not manifest during the workshops. As highlighted in Sophia's reflective diary, the focus "on sharing" as well as careful planning to embed only activities that could be perceived as "neutral" was likely to have supported the perception of a culturally inclusive environment. However, some considerations stemming from such understanding of inclusivity could be addressed. It could be firstly argued that the notion of culturally neutral does not apply to contexts such as musical workshops for refugees and asylum seekers: a welcome parallel derives from Banks and Obiakor's (2015) claim regarding classrooms where cultural and linguistic differences brought by students make the classroom inherently non-culturally neutral. Similarly, in workshops for refugees and asylum seekers, participants bring with them a breadth of cultural perspectives,

experiences and values that shape their interactions and experiences. Consequently, it might be hazardous to claim that decisions made within these workshops are culturally neutral, as they are inevitably shaped by the culturally rich and diverse context in which they take place. A second, equally important consideration, relates to facilitators' understanding of participants' culture, which is likely to be bound by their own experience, perspectives and values; as Weston and Lenette (2016) point out, while the inclusive nature that characterises these types of participatory projects might make it tempting to consider cultural unity as a feature of these projects, this may have negative implications for genuine cultural understanding. Instead, it could be more cautiously appropriate to acknowledge that one's perspectives may not fully encompass the richness and complexity of those they seek to engage with; such awareness may support future facilitators working in similar contexts in the process of decision-making within culturally rich settings. In particular, acknowledging the inherent limitations of the facilitators' perspective on participants' cultures is likely to enhance the development of a highly flexible and adaptable facilitation style, enabling facilitators to navigate culturally complex settings.

One concluding observation relates to the facilitators' perception of facilitating these workshops. The findings suggest that, despite some challenges, Mia and Sophia perceived this experience as largely positive, intense and enriching, but provided limited evidence of emotional distress. Interestingly, their experience contrasts quite sharply with that of other facilitators working with refugees and asylum seekers. Lenette and Procopis' (2016) study on musical workshops for asylum seekers in Australian detention centres revealed that feelings of distress and disillusionment were experienced by the workshop facilitators; similar findings were addressed by Kenny (2022) in relation to workshop facilitators in Irish asylum seekers centres and by Guinup (2020) when setting up choirs for refugees in the United States. A number of reasons might account for such difference: firstly, detention centres are often places where asylum seekers undergo additional traumatic experiences connected to status uncertainty, the risk of being deported as well as various forms of violence (Peterie, 2018), which are likely to make refugees in these centres an even more vulnerable group than the one Mia and Sophia worked with. Likewise, locating the workshops in a facility of the city centre and not within a detention centre is likely to have lightened the emotional weight of the experience. In addition, highly personal aspects connected to participants' individual legal status, past experiences, individual experiences of marginalisation or social status are likely to have influenced the atmosphere of the workshops. A second explanation relates to limited exposure: as the workshops were held fortnightly, this may have contributed to limiting Mia and Sophia's access to participants' traumatic experience. It is also worth noting that the facilitators received ongoing team support and ample opportunities to express their feelings, which may have mitigated potential unease in these workshops and could have supported facilitators in the event that traumatic experiences were shared by participants. One last explanation could be that this specific group of participants had fewer opportunities to discuss their experiences of displacement during the workshops, as facilitators prioritised music-making and participants' enjoyment. Therefore, while the generally positive experiences shared by the two facilitators in this study may be the result of the characteristics of the specific context, they offer insights into the array of structures and support systems enabling facilitators to cooperate and work in similar settings.

Conclusions and Implications

This article contributes to the expanding body of research concerning music and artistic activities with refugees and asylum seekers through an examination of facilitators' perspectives on their approach to workshop delivery. Uniquely, these workshops offered an opportunity for co-facilitation, providing scope to develop collaborative facilitation skills, in particular through embracing a flexible and adaptive approach to planning and delivery to foster collective and active participation among attendees. These skills were most likely enhanced by the mutual learning approach reported by the facilitators, who gained valuable insights from engaging with participants' contributions, simultaneously providing the chance to learn from and with participants. A central feature emerging from this approach was the dynamic relationship between facilitators and participants, where the artistic outcome was not a pre-determined product introduced by the facilitators for participants to learn and master. Instead, it was co-created in real time through the active and collaborative engagement of everyone involved in the workshop. This mutual exchange not only enriched the learning experience for both facilitators and participants but also contributed to the development of a sense of equality within the workshops. While there were opportunities also for facilitators' artistic development, additional research is required to further investigate this aspect.

Although the focus of this research was on facilitators rather than on attendees, these workshops were delivered to provide a safe space for collaborative music-making and sharing among participants; it is therefore plausible that these events offer a sense of stability, inclusion, agency and contribute to participants' wellbeing at least for the duration of the workshop, as already evidenced by Weston and Lenette (2016). In addition, findings suggested that these workshops supported individual participants' growth, particularly in terms of confidence and motivation, and thus future studies may build on this by investigating the processes supporting this development, including choice of material, group demographic and mechanisms of facilitation. Further research could also expand on the use of singing in workshops of this nature, negotiating possible challenges arising from emotional and linguistic issues, as well as the potential for cross-cultural communication, which may support integration into new communities. As evidenced by the growing number of similar projects (Nicolaou, Nijs, and van Petegem, 2023), further specialised training tailored to facilitating such initiatives is recommended. This training should focus on the development of key professional values, skills, and knowledge, such as empathy, compassion (toward oneself and others), flexibility (e.g. adaptive planning), resilience, collaboration, cultural competence, and specific abilities such as singing. These competencies will equip facilitators to navigate the multifaceted dynamics of working with vulnerable groups, ensuring that workshops are not only inclusive and culturally sensitive but also effectively address the diverse needs and experiences of participants. Therefore, investing in targeted training programmes for future facilitators emerges as a valuable step in optimising the potential positive impact of participatory projects with the refugee and asylum seeker communities.

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