

Music Lab 2011-13: Some Final Reflections

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Intro

The Music Lab project has been a significant project for Sage Gateshead, and its importance and impact will continue to be felt for some time. It has informed not just how we approach large-scale action research projects like it, but perhaps more importantly, it has required us to develop a deeper understanding of our organisational practices, especially the pedagogical ones, and develop ways of articulating them. This in turn has been instrumental in shaping further key development for us, like our Higher Education programme and our Research Strategy. Being required to engage in academic, philosophical and theoretical discourse with professional colleagues from Science disciplines has helped us to be clearer about how we understand our own practice. In particular, the importance of dialogue as a pedagogical feature in our organisational practices has been highlighted, which helps us in the longer term to articulate what it is we do, and why it is effective.

Organisational Learning

We talk about ourselves as a 'Learning Organisation' (Senge, 1990) and this is often meant in two senses. Firstly, we think of ourselves as an organisation that is constantly learning from our experience. Secondly, that learning is influenced by the fact that a key part of what we do is to facilitate others' learning. The Learning and Participation department of the organisation where Music Lab sat works with tens of thousands of participants each year. The relationship between the nature of the learning we provide for others, and our own organisational learning, is something which we are only beginning to understand how to articulate, but it is a significant feature of the organisation's learning culture. Music Lab provided us with a unique opportunity to focus on that relationship, as it forced us to consider the nature of the learning cultures we inhabit, both in terms of our educational delivery, and our own organisational culture.

Music as Simultaneous Dialogue

The fact of our existence as a music organisation may in itself be significant. Daniel Barenboim emphasises the dialogic nature of the musical transaction:

'In a spoken dialogue between two human beings, one waits until the other has finished what [they have] to say before replying or commenting on it. In music, two voices are in dialogue simultaneously, each one expressing itself to the fullest while at the same time listening to the other. We see from this the possibility of learning not only about music but from music – a lifelong process.' (Barenboim, 2009, p. 20)

It was maybe no surprise then, that dialogue became such an important feature of the Music Lab project, at every level:

Between musicians and students

The pedagogical instinct of the musicians involved – all experienced practitioners - was generally to engage learners in Constructionist ways of learning, emphasising learners' involvement, ideas and experiences in shaping the learning. The Music Lab report talks about highlighting 'collaborative' learning as a feature. Seen through a 'dialogic' lens, the project mirrors the approach of the Thinking Together initiative (Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif, 2004) where "exploratory talk', a form of talk that includes the exchange of opinions and the analysis of differences' (Howe, 2009) is a key feature. While dialogic principles might be seen as simply good pedagogical ones, as they invite learners into higher level epistemological territory (Kuhn, n.d.), the consistently dialogic approach of the musicians became a key pedagogical characteristic of the project.

Between teachers and musicians

This was borne out in the relationships which developed between the musicians and their host teachers. Although the final report emphasises the work with the school students, for some of the teachers involved, the opportunity for dialogue with the visiting musician was very significant as it gave them a different perspective on their own practice. Having the opportunity to inhabit 'dialogic space' (Bakhtin, 1981; Wegerif, 2012) with a professional from another discipline meant that the value of this kind of learning was felt rather than just intellectualised, reinforcing its pedagogical and epistemological value.

Between advisors and school research partnerships

The involvement of the Advisors with the schools was also significantly dialogic. Each advisor came with their own particular set of wisdom, expertise and experience, and the resulting dialogues with musicians, teachers and other school partners helped to reveal hitherto unacknowledged perspectives.

Between advisors

A significant feature of the project was the very complex dialogues which went on at Advisory Group level, helping to establish – if not a single, clear conceptual framework for the project – a multi-faceted 'constellation' (Gilloch, 2002) of critical opinions which provided a valuable theoretical context for the project, captured in [this Prezi](#). At times there was strong disagreement about many aspects of the project and its progress, but these disagreements helped to establish an even broader territory for understanding the work. In dialogic terms, this was 'deepening' the dialogic space surrounding the project by 'increasing the degree of reflection on assumptions and grounds' (Wegerif, 2012), whilst also 'widening' it by, 'increasing the degree of difference between perspectives while maintaining the creative relationship' (ibid).

Between Subjects

In this way, the whole project might be seen as a dialogue between the subjects of Music and Science. Using divergent disciplines as a way of revealing unanticipated perspectives might be seen as being wholly dialogic, as 'every dialogue generates a third voice or position, that of the witness or the 'super-addressee' (Wegerif, 2012). The Music Lab report talks about 'disrupting traditional thinking and practice' by 'looking at the teaching of one subject through the lens of another discipline' (*Music Lab Evaluation Report*, 2013). A dialogic view might see this less as disruption, and more as 'widening' and 'deepening' 'dialogic space' by the deliberate introduction of divergent perspectives, knowing that they will result in new insights and perspectives for all of those positions.

Dialogue infused all elements

The realisation that this broadly dialogic approach was consistent across all aspects of the project has been hugely helpful in terms of refining our own understanding of our organisational practices. As a Learning Organisation, developing a deeper understanding of the kinds of ways we learn and promote learning is invaluable. It's an attitude to learning which is similar to the kind of 'Creative Collaborative Learning' that Barbican-Guildhall currently espouse (Gregory and Renshaw, 2013; Renshaw, 2011, 2013) with an emphasis on the importance of accounting for divergent perspectives, and creating situations where those divergent perspectives can be brought into dialogue with each other.

Inevitably, as an attitude to learning which emphasises difference rather than similarity, it's not without its challenges. The 'creative tension' (Wegerif, 2012) which is established between perspectives in a dialogue isn't always a comfortable place to inhabit, and requires all parties to be able to see past any discomfort, differences of opinion or disagreements to the place of resolution beyond. This didn't always happen swiftly in Music Lab – some students felt out of their 'comfort zones' participating in musical activities during Science lessons and their engagement suffered as a result; agreeing roles and responsibilities between musician and school wasn't always straightforward and required mediation in some instances; there was often heated disagreement between advisors. As a process, dialogue doesn't necessarily provide the quickest route from A to B, but it does help to reveal a depth of understanding that can't be reached by simply remaining within a pre-existing and familiar frame-of-reference.

Impact

The consistency and clarity of seeing a dialogic process manifest in every level of a research project like Music Lab has been instrumental in shaping and refining our own processual understanding, and our thinking about other parts of the organisation's programme. Since Music Lab, and as a result of the learning from it:

- the development of our Higher Education programme has increasingly emphasised the importance of a dialogic approach, especially on our BA (Hons) Community Music course. Even the way the curriculum is conceived and developed has become more dialogic, with [key concepts](#) presented as 'temporary' constellar structures subject to change arising from students' own insights.
- Similarly, the organisation's emergent [Research Strategy](#) is conceived as a dialogic process of knowledge acquisition about the organisation's diverse practices.
- The focus of my own doctoral research has also shifted, from attempting a more straightforward understanding of the psychological benefits of music-making outside of musical domains, to a more dialogic investigation into the *creative tensions* between *participatory* and *presentational* music.

Sage Gateshead is still a young organisation, about to celebrate its tenth anniversary, and is only beginning to develop a mature articulation of its practices. Music Lab has been instrumental not only in helping us to develop our reflective capacity as an organisation, but also in helping us to develop a deeper understanding of the pedagogical practices which have supported our rapid growth as an internationally-respected Learning Organisation.

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