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Chapter 3: 'Creativity in popular songwriting curricula – teaching or learning?' By Joe Bennett

Creativity is the 'mom's apple pie' of education. Indeed, the assumption that 'all creativity is good' can go unchallenged in many other fields, including business, engineering, information technology, therapy, psychology and, of course, the arts. Negus and Pickering (2000: 259) suggest that the word's ubiquity has 'drained [it] of any valid meanings or any useful critical application'. It follows, then, that any serious academic investigation into creativity must define its terms: in psychologist Donald MacKinnon's words, 'Any attempt to identify and measure creativity must be based upon a prior decision as to what creativity is' (MacKinnon, 1963: 25).

The contributing authors of this book address the problem of definition by pluralizing the term, rejecting the idea of a single phenomenon called *creativity* and instead choosing to identify and discuss multiple *creativities* (Burnard, 2012). In my own particular corner of higher music education the creativities in question relate to Western popular songwriting – which I and others (McIntyre, 2008; Bennett, 2011) define as the creation of original songs as in the context of primarily US/UK popular music from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[1] In this chapter I set out some frameworks for identifying these creativities, and suggest strategies for activating and developing them in undergraduate and postgraduate learners. The approaches I outline are partly based on my

[1] I hope that the teaching and learning strategies outlined here can be applied outside the framework of what McIntyre calls 'Western Popular Songwriting', and I have had limited experience of working with students from other cultural backgrounds (e.g. Cantonese pop, French Chanson or Latin American dance music). But given this limitation in these contexts it will be for others to ascertain how applicable the approaches outlined here may be outside US/UK popular music traditions.

Chapter from Burnard, P., and Haddon, L. (2014) (Eds) Activating Diverse Musical Creativities: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. London: Bloomsbury.

own experience of designing and delivering songwriting curricula at my own institution (Bath Spa University in the UK) at Bachelor and Masters level.

What do you imagine when you read the words 'writing a song'? If your cultural conditioning is as an Anglophone pop musician born in the late twentieth century (as mine is) you probably have in your mind an image of a single individual at a guitar or piano with pen and paper. If you are a maker of contemporary popular music you may visualize someone sitting at a Mac in a music studio environment, mouse-dragging drum loops and samples around the screen, or you may be thinking of a rock band in the rehearsal room riffing loudly as the singer improvises into the vocal microphone. Lovers of musical theatre or the Great American Songbook may conjure a collaborative effort whereby a lyricist and a composer discuss the finer points of a melodic phrase or artful rhyme. If your music education background is in the classical tradition you may even imagine Franz Schubert's quill pen spontaneously creating what Roger Scruton (2012) called 'a flow of unaffected melody without compare in the history of music'.[2]

All of these activities are 'songwriting creativities' in the sense that they may result in an artefact of musical and literary intellectual property – a unique combination of pitches and words that can be performed or recorded by a singer. But even this (hopefully unassailable) broad definition of the creative artefact requires refinement. We are asking our students to create something in an educational context: this will require a defined curriculum, a set of learning outcomes and assessment strategies, and a number of pedagogical tools for guiding the learner's journey. I suggest that this requires an

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[2] This is my first and final reference to songs in the classical tradition. While it is unarguable that Schubert was literally a writer of songs, my work in HE music is based on an understanding that the cultural semantics of the term 'songwriter' refer to composers of popular music.

understanding of the created object itself. Before asking 'how shall we teach songwriting?' we must ask 'what is a song?'

The early development of popular music studies as a university subject during the 20th century grew out of two fields – musicology and cultural theory. Phillip Tagg playfully describes the approaches as 'MUSIC AS MUSIC – the TEXT' and 'EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE MUSIC – the CONTEXT' (2006: 47). Clearly, if our stated goal is to get students to *make* music then the former approach is the most useful to us, but the text (of each new song) still needs to be considered contextually – that is, in the context of the art form defined by extant songs. It would be impossible for a student who had never heard a popular song to write one – or at least, not one that would be meaningful for listeners. And the preceding sentence highlights an important verb that has preoccupied popular music scholarship in recent years (McIntyre, 2001; Tagg, 2009; Moore, 2012; Bennett, 2012): 'heard'. For traditional academic approaches to classical musicology, the score is the text. It is possible for universities to use scores to study the Western art music tradition, and perhaps even to learn about composition, because a musical score contains enough information to describe the sound in some detail, usually based on a known (orchestral) timbral palette. In popular music, the audio is the text. A song score (typically a 'lead sheet' consisting of treble clef melody, lyric and harmony) is usually a reductive post facto object – that is, a low-bandwidth transcription of an audio artefact. It follows, then, that teaching students to analyse or write music notation does not necessarily teach them to write songs, and that some engagement with the processes involved in creating (recorded or performed) audio will be necessary.

Most established theories of creativity agree on two important points – that successful creative individuals must acquire their requisite skills through long-term immersion in a domain (Campbell, 1960; Mackinnon, 1963; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Simonton, 2000)[3] and that an artefact must be valuable to others in order to be considered creative (Boden, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Mackinnon, 1963). We cannot expect songwriting students to produce what Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 53) called '*habitus* – systems of durable, transposable dispositions' without an experiential understanding of what songs are like.[4] When a student's song has been completed, not only can we not *avoid* applying value judgements to it, we are *required* to do so if we are to engage in a discussion of the extent to which the song is a creative object. Applying this perspective to our curriculum planning, we must therefore ask how domain immersion can be developed and how we deal with issues of value in student songwriting.

Domain immersion

Music students who enter higher education are not beginners. They almost always play an instrument, and many will already have written music. University admissions departments, and the academic staff that work with them, are effectively measuring the depth and breadth of musical and extramusical prior learning in order to decide whether an applicant is able to achieve the learning outcomes of the course. Entry qualifications could be described as a shorthand for measuring domain immersion: when an admissions

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[3] One might also include Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 work *Outliers*, which I do not formally cite here due to its non-academic approach, but his term 'the 10,000 hour rule' is useful as a proxy for domain immersion; that is, to become successful all individuals must experience significant exposure to their chosen domain.
[4] For a more detailed discussion of the way Bourdieu's theories can be applied to musical creativities, see Burnard (2012: 72–100 and 271-273).

tutor sees 'grade 8 piano' or 'voice diploma' on a university application form, this describes a prior learning path, neatly packaged by schools, colleges and private music tuition into a known quantity that can demonstrate the student's suitability for a particular course.

A songwriting curriculum, like any higher education music course, must find admissions procedures that can measure an applicant's aptitude for the course. Here in the UK we currently (as at 2014) work to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), defined by the independent agency that regulates UK higher education, the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency). This framework requires that a holder of a Bachelor's degree (FHEQ 'level 6') must have developed 'an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline'. Colliding UK higher education requirements and psychological theories of domain immersion as a prerequisite for creativity, it is clear that university music curricula must not only teach domain immersion, they must find mechanisms to evaluate it in applicants for Bachelor's degrees. Let us now apply the same principle to a Masters degree – for which the curriculum must enable its graduates to 'act autonomously in planning and implementing tasks at a professional or equivalent level' (QAA, 2008: 21). Clearly, we must ask our applicants to demonstrate substantial domain immersion on entry, the equivalent of having studied a Bachelor's degree. The Masters curriculum must then enable successful applicants to create new work 'at the forefront of an academic or professional discipline' that is also demonstrably at a 'professional or equivalent level'. Following the semantics of the term 'professional', our teaching and learning strategy may even have to consider the commercial viability of student songs.

These curricula are about creativity, though, so one might (speciously) argue that all creative work is at the forefront of the discipline, because it is by definition new. I suggest that this hypothetical viewpoint has no value in curriculum planning terms because, taken to its logical conclusion, it would enable complete beginners to work at Masters level, an activity that is (rightly) not possible in any equivalent HE music course. We therefore need to evaluate the applicant's work (and later, the work of the on-programme student) by all three of the prerequisites for creativity – the songs submitted must be *new*, *surprising* and *valuable* (Boden, 2004: 1).[5] *Newness* can be measured easily – it requires only that the song is neither a cover version nor is it plagiaristic of extant work. But as Boden points out, anyone can create something that is creative in subjective personal terms. Our curriculum must engage with creativities that go beyond the psychological and embrace the historical.

> [one might] make a distinction between 'psychological' creativity and 'historical' creativity (P-creativity and H-creativity, for short). P–creativity involves coming up with a surprising, valuable idea that's new to the person who comes up with it. It doesn't matter how many people have had that idea before. But if a new idea is H–creative, that means that (so far as we know) no one else has had it before: it has arisen for the first time in human history (Boden, 2004: 2).

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[5] From hereon I capitalize the adjective 'Creative' whenever I use it to mean that an object or activity is new, surprising and valuable.

Songwriting, like every art form, has constraints that define it. We know from our own experience that popular songs are likely to be longer than two minutes and shorter than five; they are usually in 4/4 time, in AABA or chorus form, and work within four- and eight-bar phrases. The majority of popular song lyrics have first-person lyric themes relating to romantic love; most songs rhyme and the words 'sing well', favouring vowel-heavy monosyllables and generally avoiding sibilants and plosives (Bennett, 2011; Salley, 2011). Creatively, there is no reason why a student – or any songwriter – should not choose to challenge these statistical norms. But anyone immersed in the domain of popular songs will have developed an understanding of its conventions and constraints. The choice to break them according to artistic impulse is of course the student's own, but I would argue that a songwriter's skill is to make Creative work within known constraints – not necessarily the constraints of the mainstream pop song, but of any genre in which the songwriter is working. An applicant might choose to submit a portfolio consisting of a one-chord song in 13/8 time with a 113-bar introduction and lyrics about a pet cat's sleeping habits, but such a genre-less song would not only be unhelpful in demonstrating the learner's understanding of the popular song domain, it would also be an arguably uncreative object, being unlikely to create cultural value for a listener. A free-for-all songwriting curriculum where all songs were valued regardless of their content or quality would clearly be meaningless as a learning experience. Paradoxical as it may appear, then, a curriculum that aims to nurture Creativity must embrace constraint. In admissions terms, this means asking all applicants to submit a portfolio of prior work, and evaluating

it partly on its originality but also partly on a demonstrated awareness of established constraints of song form, recording and production.

In the admissions process I have always favoured an audio-based (as opposed to score-based) approach to songwriting portfolios, because audio recordings of songs demonstrate a wider skillset (that is, including production, arrangement and performance skills). In the early 2000s I used to ask applicants for CDs – this was later (from 2007) replaced with website URLs for convenience. The ability to post audio online tells the admissions team more about the applicant than the extent of their ability to write songs – it shows a host of tertiary abilities, including online file management, time management, self-editing, presentation skills, adding metadata to audio and webpages, and perhaps even empathy with an imagined audience. These are also indicators of transferable learning that can assist with more general evaluation of the student's preparedness for higher education.

A constraint and domain-based approach to admissions (and later, curriculum design) carries with it the risk that the learning will become too prescriptive – at worst, songs being evaluated and written to a template defined by applying a chosen canon of prior work. In generational terms alone such a prescriptive curriculum would be a cultural and educational car crash, academics being usually older than their students and therefore having different domain reference points. My approach is determinedly genre-agnostic. Students can and should be able to write any kind of song they choose. The challenge for the curriculum and its assessors is culturally contextualizing the song so that its quality can be evaluated – partly by the extent to which it demonstrates knowledge of constraints

within a genre and partly by the way it achieves value and surprise within those expected norms.

The learner

Why would someone want to do a songwriting course? We assume that the applicants are already songwriters; if they had not yet written songs, they would, as implied above, need to start their educational journey at a pre-HE level. In my experience of interviewing and auditioning applicants for Bachelor and Masters level popular music courses, aspirations are often professional (a desire for a career in music), creative (a desire to use the university experience to build a high-quality portfolio of work) and social (going to university because of parental/societal expectation, and simply choosing popular music because it is a favourite subject).

Almost all applicants who are already songwriters state that they wish to improve their songwriting, or at least that they intend to write new songs. This intention displays an inherent humility; learners are stating that there is more to learn and (by implication) that they do not consider their own song portfolios to be yet good enough, in quantitative and/or qualitative terms. But a desire to create popular music – and particularly to write songs – requires self-belief and in many cases an applicant self-identifies as 'an artist with something to say'. The desire to improve, then, is representative of a need for curricular guidance towards craft but not necessarily towards art. Students want to acquire tools that will enable them to write better songs. They may not want anyone to tell them what type of songs to write. The desire to write original music is already present in every applicant and on-programme student – I contend that tutors have little work to

do in encouraging songwriters to write songs. There is, however, a great deal of potential curricular activity relating to *re*-writing songs, as we shall see.

If artistic self-belief is a possible driver of learner behaviour (particularly in student songwriters who intend to perform their own material), then a songwriting curriculum must consider how such beliefs function, and perhaps it must interrogate the cultural meaning of the term 'songwriter'. As I have suggested, for many people the word is assumed to be synonymous with 'singer-songwriter', and this carries with it a further set of cultural assumptions – that songs will be implicitly autobiographical, performed on piano or guitar, and expressive of the writer's own thoughts, feelings and world view. This is a dangerous cocktail in an educational environment, because it means the curriculum is dealing not only with students' *work* but also with their *egos*. There is a risk that such students may perceive song critiques from peers or tutors as a personal attack, and react defensively, using authorial authenticity as a justification for refusing to engage in any further development or editing of the song. Not only could this be an unpleasant educational and emotional experience for the student, it is also unlikely to be a driver of improvement for the creative skillset.

The idea of authorial authenticity is a culturally powerful one, and it is allied to romantic notions of creativity-as-divine-genius that, despite being roundly debunked by creativity scholarship (Boden, Csikszentmihalyi, Simonton and many others), persist in the media and in the minds of some aspirant songwriters. Why is this so? I suggest that it is partly the fault of songs themselves. When we hear a popular song, particularly one performed by a singer-songwriter, we are encouraged to engage in its thematic world, to believe in the authenticity of the story being told and the authorial voice of the teller. As

listeners we know that songs are crafted (and most of us know that the audio product itself is a result of teamwork) but as we engage in the soundworld of a song we are invited to put these things aside and follow the story the 'actor' is telling us (Hennion, 1989: 416). Part of the songwriter's craft is purposefully to engage the listener in this way. An aspirant songwriter, then, may fall victim to a powerfully seductive non sequitur – *songs speak straight to my heart, so I will write songs straight from the heart*. Students who subscribe to this viewpoint are likely to be unresponsive to critique and slow to develop new songwriting skills, constrained as they are by an assumption that to express something in song is to tell a personal truth. This state of affairs seems to be particular to songwriting – we don't assume that film actors who play evil characters are actually evil people, nor do we believe that writers of crime fiction need to commit crimes in order to write good stories. Media interviews with successful songwriters often collude in the construction of the fiction. For most people, it is more interesting to hear a songwriter discuss feelings of love and loss than it is to learn how the third line of verse two was edited many times on the page to make the syllable count fit the melody or (even worse) to learn how individual sung notes may have been edited in software to enhance their emotional power or improve their pitch accuracy. Indeed, to take the latter approach would risk devaluing the authenticity of the song in the listener's mind. I have written elsewhere (Bennett, 2013) about the way that notions of autobiographical authenticity combine with what Boden (2004: 14) calls the '*inspirational* and *romantic*' myths of creativity to create problems for songwriting research because 'mysteriousness itself is a cultural asset' (Bennett, 2011). In curricular terms this is a difficult obstacle, but one that

must be circumvented if we are to support students in achieving original creative expression whilst improving the skills of artistic craft.

Not all songwriting students consider themselves singer-songwriters. Some write songs for a band to perform (indeed, some co-write with others *as* a band) and a significant minority want to write songs for others to perform. The former group is served by the fact that the curriculum must deal with collaborative songwriting anyway, this activity being a substantial part of US/UK songwriting activity in the twentieth century (Pettijohn II and Ahmed, 2010). Non-performing songwriters present more of a challenge, because their skillset represents a smaller part of the popular song production process, possibly making them less autonomous learners because they may need additional support to realize and present the song. A non-performing songwriter is, at the least, required only to create lyric, melody and harmony.[6] This creates an admissions and curricular challenge because the group of learners with a broader skills base (the performing songwriters with advanced audio production skills) can produce better audio than those with a narrower one (the non-performing songwriters without production skills). Our classroom activity must embrace both versions of the songwriting act, but clearly the latter category of student will need more support in the audio realization of their song. The alternative solution to the problem is to admit only multi-skilled students, but I suggest this would be unfair. It is a fact of history that world-class songs have been written by songwriters who deal only with melody and lyric; we cannot reasonably turn away learners who write songs by this definition. To summarize the problem: audio must

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[6] Indeed, many successful songwriters are 'topliners' and write only melody and lyric, collaborating with producers who provide backing tracks and post-production editing.

be the assessed object, but we are assessing songwriting rather than (necessarily) performance or production.

Songwriting creativities

The constituent elements of popular music's audio product have remained constant throughout its history, even though their technological and creative context may change. I suggest that this product requires seven creative contributions – production, instrumental performance[7], vocal performance, arrangement, melody, lyric and harmony. In Allan Moore's terms, the first four are from the 'performance' and the last three are from the 'song': the two combine to make the 'track'. He takes the view that 'the intervention of producers, arrangers and engineers is arguably as important as the contribution of the original songwriter' (Moore, 2012: 14). To describe all seven contributions I propose the collective term 'Track Imperatives'. Recorded popular music has always required these and continues to do so, regardless of how these tasks may be distributed among individuals.

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[7] Like Moore, I use the word 'performance' in its broadest sense here, because of course an instrumental part does not have to be supplied by a live instrument and could, for example, be programmed in software.
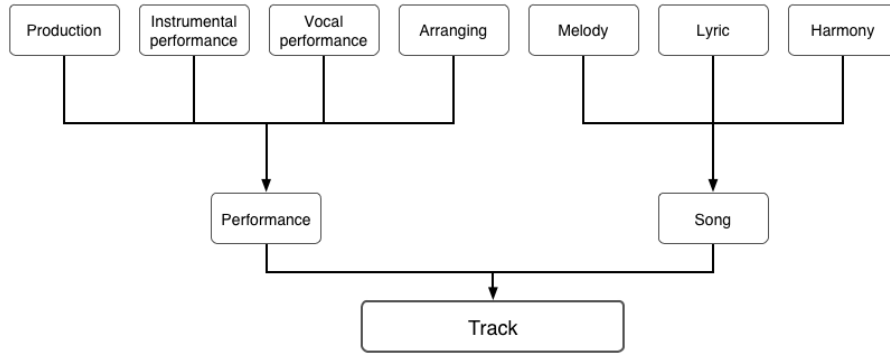
Figure 1 – Track Imperatives: creative activities leading to a track

Songwriting students may excel in any combination of these areas, which can all contribute to a listener's sense of value in a recorded song. When we are assessing student work – at application stage or in the curriculum – it is important to be able to evaluate the experiential skill development in all of the imperatives. One can understand the temptation for teachers to isolate melody, harmony and lyric for teaching purposes: they are the lowest-bandwidth contributions, and are probably easier to assess than the other four, given the pedagogical and analytical tools available to us from traditional musicology and literary criticism. But to take this approach for all songs would return us to the risk of a cultural canon, because different genres of popular music attach different levels of emphasis to audio-based creativity. A student's prog rock song might be considered unsuccessful if based exclusively on a four-chord harmonic loop, whereas such a loop might be an effective creative constraint if the intention were to write contemporary mainstream pop. Popular music places its creative surprises in relation to its constraints. A wordy narrative lyric may be balanced with a comparatively static melody; a busy polyrhythmic backing groove may support relatively simple vocal

scansion. Static elements such as harmonic loops soon become transparent for the listener and therefore divert the attention elsewhere. A songwriter's creativities require not only an understanding of the seven Track Imperatives but the ability to balance them successfully in an audio artefact.

Teaching approaches – from sandbox to curriculum

The songwriting teaching and learning strategies I outline here did not appear fully formed based on the above theorizing. Rather, they have evolved based on discussions with many different songwriters, teachers and songwriting students over more than ten years. In 2004 I was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the UK's Higher Education Academy, which included attendant funding for a five-year project entitled 'Investigating The Teaching and Learning of Songwriting in Higher Education'. The funds were used to set up a residential songwriting summer school (the UK Songwriting Festival) in which songwriters of any level of experience could write one song per day with the guidance of professional songwriters, session musicians, music producers and music academics. Because the project was not allied to the FHEQ (and learners had no particular goal other than to write songs for fun) it could be used as a 'pedagogical sandbox' in which I and the tutor team could try different teaching and learning strategies and evaluate their effects, not only upon the learners but also upon the songs themselves. Successful ideas were absorbed into more formal curricular teaching at Bachelor and Masters level and adapted periodically through the University's normal quality systems of curriculum improvement.

Let us repeat the earlier thought experiment from a pedagogical point of view. What do you imagine when you read the words 'teaching songwriting'? You may be visualizing an individual tutor (chalk 'n') talking to a class of students who are taking notes on the techniques or methods that the more experienced songwriter at the front of the classroom is imparting. This broadcast-based teaching model is rare in my own experience of songwriting in higher education. Students can benefit from learning about the relationship between process and product, but this learning is difficult to impart verbally, because it is in the nature of creative curricula that the product must be unique every time. Process and product are connected, but no teacher or student can reliably predict the latter based on knowledge of the former. And even if it were possible for tutors to communicate their personal songwriting strategies clearly and reliably, who is to say that students want to write songs that sound like their tutors'?

Our curriculum, then, must engender four things: increased domain immersion, an ability to be self-critical and edit work, genre-agnostic creative freedom, and the building of an improved portfolio of work. These translate into four respective approaches to teaching and learning – *repertoire analysis*, *formative assessment*, *constraint-based tasks*, and finally the activity that forms part of all music-makers' learning experiences – *practice*.

Repertoire analysis

One of the joys of a music education is the opportunity to listen to music that is new to the learner, and to be guided towards this undiscovered music by suitably informed teachers and peers. Given creativity's psychological requirement for deep domain

immersion, listening must therefore be a practical necessity for musically creative curricula. But *how* should we listen, and what should we encourage our students to listen *for* in order to make them better songwriters? To answer this question, let us consider the constituent parts of a song. It includes lyrics, which are sung to a melody; these elements are structured in musical time to create tempo, pace and form. Lyrics exhibit thematic meaning (or sometimes deliberately ambiguous meanings); they also have literary qualities such as imagery, rhyme, alliteration, metaphor and narrative. Melodies exhibit pitch choices in rhythmic context – notes fall at particular points in the bar. Melodies and lyrics combine to have an arguably different meaning from what they convey separately – a word sung loudly at the top of a vocalist's range may convey different meanings for an audience than if it were sung at a lower pitch or quieter dynamic. Most popular songs have an instrumental accompaniment – a single instrument or an ensemble. These elements combine in the audio artefact and are received simultaneously by listeners.[8] There are, then, many aspects of a song that we can use to engender analytical skills in our students, and this analysis can help to develop a deeper understanding of which of these elements are controlled by the songwriter. This knowledge of songwriting's raw materials can be combined with knowledge of how previous songwriters have used them to inform a student's own creative practice. We do not necessarily need to know how songs were written to create a valuable educational experience for our students; given the unspecific and romantic reflections on the creative processes supplied by some

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[8] For a more exhaustive list of ways in which a listener can receive and interpret the content of a recorded song, see Moore (2012: 331-336).

songwriters in interview (Bennett, 2013), this is probably just as well. Any increase in domain immersion can provide valuable learning for a songwriter.

In legal terms, lyrics are usually considered to be fifty per cent of a song's intellectual property. Lyrics are a literary work, which combines with a musical work – the composition – to make the complete song. Regardless of whether one agrees with this point of view (my own being that fifty per cent is rather generous considering all of the other important creativities embodied in a recorded song), it is undeniable that a songwriting class must engage with lyrics. This is a challenge in a music-focused curriculum but it is also an opportunity. Every learner uses verbal language, regardless of his or her level of musical training, and therefore lyric-based work creates a more level playing field than any classwork encumbered by musicological or music production terminology and prior learning. Here, songwriting teaching can draw on literary analysis, incorporating the same analytical tools and terms as would be used to discuss a book or poem. Let's say we are discussing The Beatles' *Yesterday* (1964), and considering the literary techniques and elements an analysis class might discuss. It displays word economy, telling a complete story in eighty-four words plus repeats; it contains masculine rhymes and assonance; it is light on consonants and emphasizes vowel sounds and monosyllables. At postgraduate level we could choose to combine our literary analysis with recent research on the way vowels are used in popular songs (e.g. Salley, 2011). Our analysis class could be lyrics-only, or music and lyrics, or in fact any of the seven Track Imperatives in any combination. When McCartney's narrator sings the words 'far away' at the end of line one, he is not only singing three long vowels, he is adding melodic tension by singing a note of E on the word 'far' against the underlying

chord of D minor, resolving to a note of D on 'away'. Music and lyric could both be viewed through form analysis – *Yesterday* is in AABA form (verse/verse/bridge/verse) and yet it slightly subverts the form by using seven bars per verse rather than the more usual eight bars found in many thousands of Great American Songbook standards. As a result, it presents potential for an interesting class discussion about innovation in the context of known constraints.

Would such an analysis session make our students better lyricists? Not immediately, perhaps, but it would help them to consider lyrics as a set of creative tools that can be used to create meaning for a listener. And reinforcing the idea that lyrics exhibit established literary communication techniques could contribute to an understanding of lyric craft as a conscious editorial choice by the songwriter, helping learners to deconstruct for themselves the mythology of the inspirational and romantic.

The above example again raises the difficult curricular question of repertoire. The Beatles are enormously important in the history and study of popular music (a colleague of mine refers to them as 'the Shakespeare of our subject'). Before 1962, most artists did not write their own songs; after The Beatles, this became the norm in popular music. Their list of studio technical innovations (automatic double-tracking, sampling, guitar feedback) is enormous; the equivalent musical list (harmonic complexity, challenges to form, backing vocal arrangement conventions) still longer. But they released their last album in 1970, and a huge number of popular songs have been written since then.[9] I suggest that we should define our repertoire as widely as possible, particularly culturally

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[9] The majority of which were created by people who were not young, white, British males. I do not intend to get into an in-depth discussion of cultural tyrannies here, but nevertheless suggest that a genre-agnostic curriculum requires a diversity of canonic examples.

and historically, within a broad definition of US/UK popular song. This means that analysis must engage with pre- and post-Beatles material. Personally I like to include at least one example of newly released music and one example of pre-1950 songwriting in every analysis session, to demonstrate to students that popular music is constantly changing while retaining many structural, literary and musical constants derived from its evolutionary history.

Formative assessment

The second method of teaching and learning is the evaluation of the student's own draft work. Formative assessment can be delivered through tutor critique, such as a face-to-face tutorial or tutor-written commentary on the song, or it can be delivered through peer critique, typically a group of other student songwriters where songs receive group critique in a playback session. Both models are common in creative writing higher education curricula, and require little adaptation for application to songwriting apart from a classroom environment that allows both live performance (for singer-songwriters) and audio playback (for non-performing songwriters who have recorded their draft work). Formative assessment need not be classroom-based – it is particularly suited to online learning, which can be synchronous, via videoconference, or asynchronous, using web-based time-shifted tools such as online discussion boards. My own university's distance learning songwriting curriculum was launched in 2010 and runs in parallel with the face-to-face version; students experience the same admissions and assessment criteria for both models. Songwriting is not a real-time musical activity (compared to, for example, ensemble performance or improvisation), so the time-shifting implicit in distance

learning is at the very least not a barrier, and can even provide a benefit because the learning takes place both during and between tutor contact sessions.

Because of the aforementioned issues with students' egos, it is necessary to adopt teaching strategies that engender a safe and supportive learning environment. The first of these is to make it clear that the song is always assumed to be a work in progress, so that the purpose of the critique is to inform the next stage of edits and give the songwriter an increased range of future creative choices. Songs are referred to as drafts, reinforcing the assumption that there is more work to be done. The second strategy is to use literally *constructive* language, particularly in peer sessions, that describes hypothetical future editing opportunities. After a student has played back a first draft, the peer group is asked to provide feedback in two categories – what worked well in the song, and ideas that may be useful in future editing. These ideas for future edits are of course synonymous with what *didn't* work in the song, but they are presented less as negative feedback than as additional choices that the writer may not yet have considered. If, for example, the peer critique considered the draft song's chorus to be melodically uninteresting, this would be expressed as a suggestion to try a wider choice of melodic intervals or rhythmic variation in the next editing session. This approach seems to be valued by students, even in situations where the edited draft is not intended to be re-submitted for more peer critique.

Peer group critique sessions require a tutor as chair, and not just to ensure the application of the classroom courtesies described above. One phenomenon that has always fascinated me is the inclination of groups of student songwriters to comment on the performance rather than the song in a playback situation, even though they are fully aware that this is a songwriting class. When the performer has finished playing the first

draft of the song, if the tutor then asks an open-ended question such as 'any thoughts from the group?' the first comments will tend to focus on performance elements. Typical responses might include 'I love your voice', 'you really went for it [dynamically] on the outro' or 'that's an interesting guitar part in the middle eight'. It takes considerable guidance from the tutor to steer the comments towards the core song elements of melody and lyric. I speculate that this behaviour relates to what psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2012) calls System 1 and System 2 thinking.[10] System 1 refers to our intuitive 'fast' response to decision-making situations; System 2 is our considered, reasoning, 'slow' response. Kahneman's research suggests that our brains will use System 2 only in situations where System 1 does not provide an easier answer. As listeners, we do not use our reason to decide whether we enjoy a piece of music – we respond emotionally and within our personal cultural frameworks of listening experience. To ask someone to enjoy a vocal performance or even appreciate a guitar player's skill is to invoke System 1's response to the audio product; conversely, to evaluate the songwriter's use of a lyric metaphor or the scansion of a vowel in a melisma is to ask the listener to think structurally – to invoke System 2. The role of the chair, then, is to ensure that the playback session is both positively framed and focussed on the task at hand – which is to improve the draft song.

Constraint-based tasks

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[10] Kahneman himself observes that the two Systems are not neurologically categorized – they are themselves thought experiments to describe categories of psychological behaviours as immediate/intuitive (System 1) or calculating/reasoning (System 2).

Chapter from Burnard, P., and Haddon, L. (2014) (Eds) Activating Diverse Musical Creativities: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. London: Bloomsbury.

The third strategy is to provide activities that develop songwriting skills. I refer to these as Constraint-Based Tasks (CBTs). The student is asked to write a song within a given constraint. The tasks are chosen by the tutor and can be varied according to the particular background and aspirations of each student, though in weekly group work I prefer to provide a task to everyone in the group in order to encourage students to share and discuss creative strategies with each other. There are two types of constraint – process-based and content-based. Examples of a process-based constraint would be to write a song by completing the whole lyric before setting it to music (word setting), or to write a song on an unfamiliar instrument. Examples of content-based constraints would be to write a song with a minimum tempo of 120 beats per minute, to write a song in AABA form, or to write a chorus where the title is repeated at least once (Bennett, 2009). Constraints are intended to help students to develop new creativities that may not be common in their personal *habitus*. CBTs can encourage students to become more aware of their own creativities, because the constraints of the task disable the ability to rely on previously used self-generated songwriting processes and content. Even a relatively subtle CBT such as starting from the title can have a substantial effect on the finished product. Because songs are built iteratively, every creative decision is related to every prior creative decision, meaning that simply changing the order of decision-making (by starting with the title instead of, for example, by playing chords) can force an entirely new structure of songwriting behaviours and therefore a different outcome. CBTs provide new strategies that can be deployed at will in future songwriting sessions; students learn experientially about their own personal relationship with cause and effect with reference to their own developing song catalogues.

Practice

The fourth and final strategy is simply to allow students to practise songwriting. I maintain that in music education terms, songwriting is no more mysterious than instrumental performance, sight-reading or improvisation.[11] It is a set of skills that can be deployed at will by the musician to achieve a desired outcome, and the skills can be developed through repetition. The more songs students write, the better songwriters they become. The curriculum can contribute to this by creating schemes of work and lesson plans that require new songs to be generated frequently. At residential summer schools I set a new task each day, with peer playback the following morning. For undergraduate and postgraduate work the frequency is usually weekly. Student feedback on these (ostensibly draconian) strategies has been overwhelmingly positive. Learners often report that they are surprised to be able to write songs to order, and that the curriculum has enabled them to write more songs than they thought possible in a given timescale. It appears that the curriculum's macro structure provides a sufficient incentive for the student to become more prolific than they would be with only self-motivation as their creative driver.

In my experience, songwriting curricula can successfully combine these strategies – a CBT can be provided to a group of students, who will then write the song and bring it back for peer critique the following day/week. In the playback session the group or the

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[11] David Sudnow's *Ways Of The Hand* (1993) is an auto-ethnographic 'phenomenological account of handiwork as it's known to a performing musician', providing insight into the iterative way improvisational and instrumental strategies are learned and developed. No such longitudinal study exists for composers, still less songwriters.

tutor may make reference to repertoire, and examples can be played and evaluated live in

the session. I like to have access to Spotify and Google so that the group can listen to any

song that comes up in discussion and project the lyrics via a web browser.

Assessment

Designing ILOs (Intended Learning Outcomes) and assessment criteria for creative

curricula is always challenging because of the need to evaluate originality and domain

awareness simultaneously to reach a judgement regarding the work's value. Criteria and

ILOs that are too specific risk distorting the creative process and forcing students to write

to a template; those that are too flexible may be too difficult to apply fairly in a

summative assessment (i.e. marking) situation. Some of the more technical aspects of a

song recording are relatively easy to evaluate, at least in terms of competence in mixing

and production. But these are, as we have seen, not elements of the song itself. After

many years of trying to apply detailed assessment criteria in assignment briefs I have

come to the conclusion that we must simply embrace listener subjectivity (and

songwriting tutors' own domain immersion) and rely on academic professionalism,

combined with Quality Assurance systems such as second marking and external

examiners, to make a fair and informed evaluation of student songs. From this

perspective, summative assessment criteria can be broad. I currently use only three –

'technical quality of the song recording'; 'evidence of creative control in the

songwriting'; and 'artistic quality of the finished product'. These are obviously not very

specific and may be difficult to apply consistently but I take the view that to be more

prescriptive would be to restrict the activation of creativities on students' own cultural

terms, especially at Masters level. To submit songwriting to the observation effect in this way risks damaging the very learning opportunity that has attracted students towards the subject in the first place.

Higher education?

Universities and music colleges are only a small part of a learner's musical experience. Prior to entering higher education, a student will certainly have experienced domain immersion through listening and making music with peers, and will probably have learned music with a teacher, in school or privately. Returning briefly to The Beatles, who did not of course have a formal music education, their creative output clearly exhibits ever-developing experiential learning based on prior domain knowledge (McIntyre, 2006). I suggest that this was achieved through four routes – repertoire analysis (listening to records and working out cover versions in their early days); formative assessment (peer and audience feedback on their work); constraint-based tasks (writing songs for particular self-imposed briefs); and practice (they wrote frequently). Perhaps, then, the curricular framework I propose here may just be a university version of a long-established songwriter learning experience.

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