Research Report – Executive Summary

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Listen, Imagine, Compose (LIC) is a project designed to investigate pedagogies of composing in secondary schools. It was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn foundation, and organised by Sound and Music (SAM), Birmingham Contemporary Music Group (BCMG), with Birmingham City University (BCU) as the lead academic partner. It involved composers, an apprentice composer, musicians, schoolteachers, researchers, music education partners, and critical friends. The main body of the project ran between June 2011 – Spring 2013.

Background

The 2009 Ofsted report *Making More of Music* (Ofsted, 2009) highlighted a number of issues with composing in secondary school music provision, including:

- lack of attention to internalising sound as a basis for creative thinking;
- lack of quality and depth in pupil responses;
- insufficient understanding of what musical progress involves;
- composing activities are rarely related to the work of established composers.

We know that composing is the area of the music curriculum that is often least accessible for teachers (Berkley, 2001), and that changes to the Key Stage 3 Curriculum in operation during the research period placed increased stress on genuinely creative thinking. The purpose of the LIC project was to address these issues through interaction between pupils and their teachers with professional composers and performers.

Research Questions

This research had a number of overt aims, which were expressed in the form or overarching research questions:

- How can composers and teachers be supported to work most effectively together?
- How do professional composers make judgements about the quality of compositions and what are the indicators of progression? What correlation is there between these criteria and those of exam boards?
- What does creative progression look like – for example the difference between a Year 7 and a Year 9 composition – and how can we ensure progression within the secondary curriculum, particularly given the genre-based approach?
- What are the challenges around assessing creativity and how can students be supported to take risks, fail and experiment in a system where assessment is central?
- What can we learn from the processes of professional composers and how does that relate to how composition is taught in schools?

- How can we engage young people with contemporary experimental music beyond a one-off project, and how can that learning be applied to composing within other styles and genres – in particular the types of music that young people are listening to?
- How can effective feedback develop young people's listening and composition skills?
- How can we increase awareness of the music of living composers within the secondary curriculum?
- What are the strategies of educators around creativity and how could they benefit composers working in learning contexts?

In order to address these issues, six separate research questions for operationalising in school settings were posed:

1. What pedagogical strategies are there for creative learning in music?
2. What processes for evaluating pupil work can be adopted to give constructive feedback and encourage peer review?
3. What is the role of listening and reflection in the creative process?
4. How do you introduce music to young people that they don't already know about and make it relevant to their learning - exploring values and context of contemporary art?
5. How can performers and composers best be used as a resource in the classroom?
6. How can ICT in the classroom encourage the use of creative and experimental thinking?

Each of these questions was addressed by a different school-teacher-composer-researcher team. Some project teams also had performers attached to them.

Findings
Each of the research questions generated their own findings and discussions. Here are three (highly selective) findings from each strand of the project:

Project 1 (Pedagogical strategies…)
1. Composing pedagogy involves recognising that creative learning and doing composing are interrelated.
2. Composing is a process that needs daily practice
3. Workshops work well in developing collaborative creativity which is fundamental to the compositional process

Project 2 (Evaluating pupil work…)
What helps students to learn to evaluate?
1. Questioning by the teacher
2. Asking themselves the same questions (developing a habit of evaluating)
3. Creating their own criteria and concepts for evaluation. By doing this they would begin to carve out an artistic intent, and clarity of style.

Project 3 (role of listening…)
1. Reflection and discourse resulted in growing student awareness of the importance of listening when improvising and creating new compositions;
2. Activities that demanded careful listening and the sharing of responses verbally endorsed the more frequent use of sophisticated musical vocabulary;
3. The students opted not to use notation, relying on listening memory when working from week to week on their pieces. The conclusion was that less reliance on notation had encouraged enhanced listening skills

Project 4 (introducing pupils to unfamiliar music…)
1. Take risks and move beyond norms and stereotypes
2. Composing is a slow process and that it is important to learn how to stay with the process
3. 'Relevance' is created by the participants and in particular through the ethos generated by the workshop leader

Project 5 (composers and performers as resource…)
1. Questioning is a key pedagogic skill for all - composer, performer, as well as teacher.
2. Intentionality is significant - what do pupils what to compose?
3. True Assessment for learning (AfL) can make a real difference (Fautley, 2010)

Project 6 (ICT)
1. Our main role as teachers of musical composition is to educate our students' sonic sensibilities;
2. The key way to do this is through the design and implementation of authentic, open-ended compositional tasks mediated by appropriate technologies;
3. As with all music teaching, developing a skilful pedagogy is the absolute key to ensuring the best quality process and product. "There is no curriculum development without teacher development" (Stenhouse, in Silbeck, 1983)

Overall Project findings
For the teachers in the schools concerned, pedagogies have altered. One teacher said that this work has been amongst the best CPD (continuing professional development) he has had in music teaching for many years, and that the impact of it will be felt by his classes long after the project is over.

The composers too have had their perceptions challenged. This was a very different project from the way that composer-in-school projects are usually organised. These two comments, from different composers, serve to illustrate this:

- Composer A: "I realised early on that this would be different from my usual composer-in-schools shtick!"

- Composer B: "Unlike other projects, I couldn't plan this on my walk from the railway station to the school"

Taken as a whole, ten significant themes emerged from the LIC project work:

1. **Questioning:** Asking good questions is a key skill
2. **Higher Order Thinking:** The role of higher order thinking is significant in composing, Bloom's taxonomy alone may not be sufficient
3. **Valuing pupil work:** The 'green shoots' of pupil creativity need nurturing, what is said to a pupil at this stage needs consideration
4. **Intentionality:** What pupils want to compose matters
5. **Planning:** Is fundamental to learning taking place
6. **Partnership roles and power:** Who is the expert, when? How do roles shift during a project?
7. **Structured Reflection:** Being prompted to reflect works well
8. **Learning:** 'Doing' alone is never sufficient, it intertwines with learning
9. **Process and Development:** Composing is a process, it is also developmental - pupils can get better at composing
10. **The place of final performances:** Are these always essential?

Recommendations

A wealth of material is presented in the LIC final report. From this twenty-five key recommendations are made. These apply to a variety of stakeholders, and a number of them cross over between groups, but for the sake of simplicity they are divided into main categories.

A) For those working in and with schools:

1. Develop questioning skills: All those working with young people would benefit from doing this. Plan for 'hard' questions in advance, especially those at the higher-order end of Bloom's taxonomy;
2. Added to asking good questions is the notion of involving all the pupils in the questioning process, not just those who may know the answer;
3. Consider intentionality: What do young people actually want to compose?
4. Do more of less: Organise the curriculum so that there are more in-depth composing projects (in which listening and performing will also figure significantly), lasting for longer time-scales;
5. Value fragile initial ideas: These need nurturing, compositions do not emerge fully-formed, pupils need help to understand this. The next point helps with this…
6. Deconstruct the composing process for pedagogic purposes: This report outlines ways, and points to references, as to how the composing process can be broken down for teaching and learning;
7. Deconstruct the listening process for pedagogic purposes: As with composing in item 6, work with pupils on different types of listening;
8. Do not shy away from challenging music: Pupils might know what they like, but they also like what they know. If they do not know, they cannot like - yet!
9. Critique - not criticise: There is a difference, it needs modelling for the pupils, but doing so maintains valuing their music;
10. Language: Use language carefully when discussing pupil work (See also items 5 and 9);
11. Learning versus doing: There is a symbiotic relationship between these in music education; those working with young people should be able to articulate what pupils will learn, as well as what they will do. This involves…
12. Planning for learning: Planning is hard, and time-consuming, but important;
13. Contextualise the work: What have these pupils, in this class, in this school, done before? Why this project, with them, here, and now? One size does not fit all;
14. Success criteria: What will a good one look like? What will it sound like? How will the pupils know?
15. Audio/Video recording: Use for work in progress, not just for final results. Recording is a useful AfL tool. Encourage sonic notebooks;
16. Technology need not be expensive: Freeware applications are readily available that can rival costly counterparts;
17. Involve other musicians in the school: Peripatetic music staff, sixth formers, other teachers;
18. Think about progress - what develops in a programme of study across a number of years? What develops in composing?
19. What is the role of notation? "Writing" music is not common across all cultures, styles, and genres. If notation is used, who is it for, and why?

B) For Arts organisations, and others working with educational projects:

20. Should there be an end performance? Is an artist in school project about process, or product? A focus on final performance can skew learning;
21. Allow time for reflection: When funding artists in schools projects, cost in time for structured reflection for key participants. This makes a significant difference to both process and learning;
22. All those involved in school-based work would benefit from understanding the learning contexts and accountability cultures of contemporary educational establishments;
23. Related to item 13, examine the unique context of each school or setting, and, in consultation with staff there, tailor intervention projects to suit needs of users, not demands of providers;
24. Support the embedding of LIC practice in schools through the commissioning of resources, development of CPD; and involvement of sometimes hard-to-reach classroom teachers;
25. Support within new and extant networks the dissemination of findings on what constitutes good practice in composer-in-education projects and training for composers and others interested in working in educational settings (beware of seagullism!).

Conclusions

Pedagogy, and pedagogic content knowledge (Shulman, 1986), do not develop easily. This project has shown that skilful pedagogy, of composers learning from teachers, and skilful composing pedagogy, of teachers learning from composers, is a fruitful way of working. For much of their time, teachers will be working solo with pupils, without a composer to partner them. On these occasions, learning from LIC, especially the thematic points from the previous section, will be key to their developing the composing work of their pupils.

Composers too may not work in such planning time-rich environments in future. For them the lessons of partnerships, of building on the expertise of the teacher, and of developing their own pedagogy, again including key elements from the themes and recommendations identified above, will be key to successful work.

For arts and funding organisations, questions of purpose are raised. Certainly end-of-project performances with smiling happy children and glasses of wine for patrons are nice, but are they addressing learning? Is this philanthropic window-dressing, or work designed to make a real difference to the lives of young people?

There is evidence in the LIC project of high-quality learning by composers, apprentice composers, and teachers, and of deep learning by pupils. As a result of this project we would want all those involved with composing in schools, but also with music and the arts in schools more generally, to be aware of what has been learned, and also to build on the very significant work that LIC has achieved.

References

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