

Creative Arts, Discovery and Empathy: Sharing Creativity and Exploration in Education

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Creativity is at the heart of almost everything that I do. It is part of my connections with people, including students, and helps me to understand their perspectives, potential and challenges. It plays a critical role in how I help them to understand and, in turn, assess their understanding of different aspects of my subject areas. It contributes to their and my wellbeing and is often the spark that provides the motivation to keep exploring. My own paths in performing and composing music, ethnomusicological and geographical research, and the scholarship of teaching and learning regularly criss-cross and share traits and like many others, I am concerned with how research is applied outside of academic contexts in tangible ways (Dillane and Langlois, 2021). My communities include the students in my classroom, my colleagues in a research centre and academic department, the members of a community orchestra and church choir, and my neighbours. All contribute to and inspire my creativity and I hope, in turn, that I also facilitate some of their creativity that is part of a shared learning process. As a composer, I write music with these communities in mind, sometimes informed by my ethnomusicological or geographical studies. In some instances, this creative activity draws attention to heritage or challenges in society. More and more I am challenged to find innovative ways to share this creativity and embrace technology and work across disciplines with a STEAM philosophy.

We are regularly told that creativity is important for both the economy and in education. An emphasis on creativity is integral to many national and international policies in education (Wyse and Ferrari, 2015). It can contribute to deeper learning and enhance wellbeing. It also requires bravery on the part of all involved, not least the teacher (Jorgenson, 1997). By engaging in creativity, we are exposing our vulnerabilities and must accept that the process may not lead to a polished conclusion. In this way we learn about ourselves and also gain a greater understanding of the challenges faced by others. The emphasis is much more on the process itself and the emotional engagement that rises and falls with the tides of inspiration. There is a need for trust and a belief that, much more than simply games we play, engaging in artistic pursuits can open our minds to possible solutions we did not know we were seeking. Often, the questions emerge in the creative process. Moreover, so do the people and personalities that can too often be hidden or silenced in more conservative approaches.

In this essay I reflect on three experiences from recent years that are part of my occupation as lecturer but extend beyond the classroom and formal curriculum. I value my involvement in a series of Erasmus+ funded projects with colleagues and students across Europe that placed an emphasis on creativity and the arts. I reflect on my development of a community music module for which third level undergraduate students collaborated with adults with intellectual disabilities and a concurrent music module for a certificate in independent living skills. In the face of social restrictions brought about by COVID-19 I acknowledge the important social role of artistic activities and their impact on wellbeing, drawing on my experiences with a community orchestra.

Creativity Around the World

International opportunities for learning are not just about learning about other cultures but understanding different approaches and perspectives (Kearney and Commins, 2021). Since 2012, I have been fortunate to be involved in two Erasmus projects with DkIT and collaborating institutions in Belgium, Norway and Portugal. This has involved residential experiences in the different countries that helped develop team-building and group work skills through a series of workshops, brainstorming and reflective practice. I benefitted from witnessing and learning from the approaches of my international colleagues, who embraced creativity in their different disciplines and, in particular, the

Write A Science Opera (WASO) methodology (Ben-Horin, et al, 2017; Smegen and Ben-Horin, 2020). Students were encouraged to represent their experiences through various media including visual arts, film, music, dance and drama. These projects allowed the students involved from different academic programmes to bring their discipline specific skills together and inform each other on the possibilities for problem solving or communicating various ideas or concepts. The projects also facilitated the development of inter- and multi-disciplinarity and the nurturing of entrepreneurship amongst the participants. By promoting creativity in education, we recognise the potential of culture for lifelong learning and the centrality of creativity as a human characteristic that manifests itself in different disciplines and contexts. The multidimensional nature of creativity implies that knowledge in a wide range of different domains – from artistic to technological – can be the basis for creativity and innovation.

Creativity as Communication

Creating a shared experience, sometimes from disparate starting points is also integral to the philosophies of Community Music (Higgins, 2012). While the European projects sought to bring together people from different cultural backgrounds, at home, similar collaborative exercises were utilised to engage students with different learning abilities. As with working with people from different places, collaborating with adults with different intellectual disabilities required the development of understanding and empathy and learning to focus on ability rather than disability. Community Music students on the BA (Hons) Music programme at DkIT began collaborating with service users from RehabCare in Dundalk culminating in a performance of songs that they co-wrote entitled *Hear Our Voices* in December 2015. The process highlighted that sometimes it is the simple stories we tell that teach us most about our world and push us to understand, appreciate and respect the people around us. Subsequent projects included Space for Everyone the following year, which also involved participation in the Global Science Opera, *Moon Village*, extending the learning beyond the everyday to an engagement with science and technology, focusing on gravity and the potential to live on the moon. These projects highlighted an amazing openness to ideas and wonder. My own mentor, Fr Pat Ahern, the founding Artistic Director of Siamsa Tíre, the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, repeatedly reminds me of the importance of wonder and how creativity can help us express our wonder at the world around us.

The written reflections of the participants in *Hear Our Voices* and subsequent projects demonstrated that all had taken on responsibility for and benefitted from different aspects of the project (Kearney and Sneddon, 2016). A critical facet of the projects that come through in the reflections is the democratic nature of the learning space. Facilitated by a lecturer and a co-ordinator from the care centre, participants had a prominent role in decision making and shaping the project. People with different skills could take on particular roles and there was an acknowledgement of the importance of everybody contributing in order for the project to be a success. Equality and inclusivity were hugely important aspects of the project and encourage the development of this philosophy into life beyond the classroom. It was clear from observing the participants as they worked and again on the stage that friendships were formed by individuals that may not otherwise have met. These projects were not ‘just’ music projects, they were community projects that can nurture a better place and stronger, more inclusive society.

One of the motivating factors behind the initial *Hear Our Voices* was the desire amongst service users at RehabCare to ‘go to college’. Access to Higher Education has become almost universal and yet there are still some groups that are or feel excluded. An important development at DkIT was the Certificate in Skills for Independent Living, a two-year Level 3 programme of 60 credits specifically developed for adults with intellectual disabilities. It sought to develop a lifelong learning ethos amongst learners and enable the learners develop relevant knowledge and competence to be able to take his/her place in society. One of the modules that I facilitated was focused on music. While we learned about different genres, musicians and the rudiments of music, we did so by creating. There

was natural overlap with other modules as we created songs about the learners' life experiences, inspired by what we might be listening to. In their computer literacy module, the participants created posters for a Christmas concert and we also composed some music that was incorporated into their performance of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as part of their drama module. Creating the song helped the students to understand the story, characters and relevance of the Shakespeare play and apply that learning to understanding their own life experiences.

Creativity and Community Wellbeing

Isolation has unfortunately become part of our life experience over the past year. In isolation we are challenged to not only nurture creativity in our students but find new creative approaches in our teaching. The act of musicking is also social and enhances wellbeing. The Oriel Traditional Orchestra is a cross-border, intergenerational community orchestra of which I am one of the voluntary musical directors. The approach and philosophy I bring to this community orchestra mirrors that which I developed with the Traditional Music Ensemble at DkIT in my role as lecturer (Kearney, 2019; forthcoming). I composed a piece of music pre-COVID-19 entitled 'The Oriel March' that was to be recorded by the OTO with the support of Creative Ireland Louth. With public health restrictions, the act of recording became an exercise in creativity and was a challenge that connected members of the orchestra in online spaces. The orchestra continued to rehearse virtually, exploring different approaches, and made the recording primarily using mobile phones while listening to a MIDI backing track. Engaging in this project, *Performing Oriel's Heritage*, encouraged people to discover new ways of doing things, embrace technology and communicate with and support fellow participants. They also discovered the historical built heritage of their region that was featured in the video. The project contributed to my understanding of technology, storytelling and connectivity and many participants reported back on the positive impact of being involved in a virtual community to make music on their wellbeing during a difficult period (Kearney, Commins and McGuinness, forthcoming).

Conclusion

These three examples cross formal and informal education but fundamentally underline the potential of the arts and creativity to enhance our experience - as teacher, student or participant - of education. Education and the Arts are about discovery and can be enhanced through collaboration with others. A common theme to emerge in my reflections was that engaging in creative activities leads to greater empathy, which is a step towards understanding the challenges faced in the world. Disciplinary knowledge and skills are important but creativity activities are applicable across disciplines and invite us to collaborate outside of discipline silos. I believe strongly that the study of music has a central role in education and that its importance is multifaceted and can enrich a more holistic experience of education. As a creative act, it helps develop engagement, community and wellbeing. I believe in the value of facilitating creative projects in education and integrating this across all disciplines to realise the exceptional potential that exists in all of our students. Moreover, we can step beyond the classroom to share our creativity with the wider world.

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