Assessing creativity in the secondary school classroom: Exploring variations in teachers' conceptions and practices

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ABSTRACT

As with other school subjects, assessment of creativity is a hotly debated and difficult issue for secondary music teachers. Despite the long-standing challenges of classroom-based assessment of creativity in music, the development of systematic assessment of creativity, and the constructs used by secondary teachers in assessing young people's music, remains a slippery, highly contested and under-researched area. Drawing on findings from two separate mixed methods studies, one which investigates 'Creativity and Assessment Practices in the Arts' (CAPA) and the other which explores 'Assessment of Composing at Key Stages 3 and 4 in English Secondary Schools', this paper reports on surveys and interviews with secondary school music teachers' current practice with regard to the assessment of creativity in their classroom assessment practices and of composing in particular at key stages 3 and 4. The studies triangulate three sources of data comprising questionnaires, interviews and retrospective verbal protocols. The studies reveal aspects of the broad relationships between teachers constructed conceptions 'creativity' and what teachers do with regard to assessment of creativity in music generally and composing in particular in secondary school music.

Keywords

creativity, assessment, composition, arts practices

INTRODUCTION

Historically, assessment of creativity in music has been shaped by psychometric research (Webster, 2002, 1992; Hargreaves and Galton, 1992). Psychometric approaches which rely on paper and pencil assessment that tested divergent thinking, cognitive fluency, flexibility and the originality of a subject's responses dominated the field from 1950 to 1970. For example the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking were widely used to identify individuals, including children, who were supposedly creative (Burnard, 2007). Yet, there remains no agreement on how creativity is (or should be) vested - as a construct - in assessment within the arts (Eisner, 2007; Amabile, 1983; Hickey and Lipscomb, 2006). In the nearly 3,000 studies examined by Moga *et al.* (1999), the creativity tests used "might not actually detect the kind of creativity fostered by study in the arts" (p. 102). Many of these standard tests have been criticised (Craft, 2001), for example, for measuring intelligence-related factors rather than creativity or for being too easily affected by external circumstances.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There is a small body of literature providing clear and concrete evidence of English primary teachers' constructs of creativity in their *assessment practices* of children's paintings, compositions and creative writing. In a seminal study called the DELTA Project (Development of Learning and Teaching in the Arts), Hargreaves, Galton (1996) devised a methodology which claimed to make explicit the implicit criteria which teachers used to make judgments about children's products. The findings for music made ground in helping to develop a language of assessment.

Composing can be considered as a prime musical example of the creative act, which also promotes musical thinking and understanding (Barrett, 1998). The role of composing in developing thinking skills has been investigated by (Byrne et al., 2001). A number of aspects of the composing process, including its relationship to improvisation has been investigated by (Burnard, 2000b; a), including how pupils derive meaning from composing, and what they do whilst undertaking it (Burnard, 2002; Burnard & Younker, 2004a; Burnard & Younker, 2002; 2004b). Composing in the lower secondary school in England is often undertaken in the from of group of group work, and the group composing process has been deconstructed in terms of the stages pupils work through (Fautley, 1999; 2005). Social interaction plays a large part in group composing (Burland & Davidson, 2001), and this has also been investigated in terms of the ways in which pupils talk with and to each other (Miell & MacDonald, 2000) (Major, 2007; 2008). Composition in the upper secondary school tends to be largely an individual activity and has been less rigorously explored in recent research in England.

Alongside composing, assessment is a key area of interest in contemporary educational discourse. The notion of assessment in England encompasses more than a simple notion of testing, with key differences between formative assessment and summative assessment being explored,

including ways in which the boundaries between them have become blurred, and how teachers' employment of formative assessment terminologies could be considered as being in fact 'mini-summative' assessments (Harlen & James, 1997). An important distinction relevant to teaching and learning composing is that drawn by (Black et al., 2004), who write of the 'formative use of summative assessment', a key concept in the context of curricular creativity and music-learning assessment in England. Regarding the role of formative assessment, its place in raising standards has been well documented (inter alia (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; 2002; Black, 1995; Black et al., 2003a; b; 2004; Black & Wiliam, 1998; 2006; James, 1998). Summative assessment too has been researched, and its role in 'high-stakes' assessment discussed (Harlen, 2005; Harlen, 2007; Stobart, 2001; 2008).

Assessment of composing, particularly in the English situation has received less attention, however. We have some general overviews (Stephens, 2003) (MacDonald et al., 2006) and specific research involving teachers (Byrne et al., 2003; Byrne & Sheridan, 2001). Burnard and Younker (2004b) mention assessment in their analysis of individual composing pathways. Mills (1991) investigated the musical nature of assessment, whilst Brophy (2000) looked into developmental matters. (Hickey, 2007) has documented key issues in the assessment of composing, from both a process and a product basis From a pragmatic classroom perspective, Bray (2000; 2002) and Adams (2000) discuss ways in which teachers can operationalise assessment in the classroom.

As with other school subjects, assessment of creativity is a hotly debated and difficult issue for secondary music teachers. Despite the long-standing challenges of classroom-based assessment of creativity in music, the development of systematic assessment of creativity, and the constructs used by secondary teachers in assessing young people's music, remains a slippery, highly contested and under-researched area.

THE PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is threefold. These are:

a. to identify the broad relationships between the construct of 'creativity' and its assessment in secondary school music practices;
b. to clarify the nature (i.e. specific features and range) of teachers' views of the construct of 'creativity' and their classroom assessment practices;
c. to provide theoretical and empirical insights into the design and development and meta-analysis of separate questionnaires intended to further our knowledge about the construct of 'creativity' as it applies (and is located in) arts assessment practices; so as to more comprehensively explore

the constructs drawn from secondary music teachers' views and sketch them against the conceptions identified by the literature.

The reanalysis of two separate studies was designed and addressed according to the key question addressed: 'What is the construct 'creativity' and how is it expressed in assessment practices across a range of regions in secondary school music classrooms in England? The notion of creativity is explored both separately, as a construct employed and operationalised by classroom teachers; and also as one conjoined with the allied notion of composing as a classroom activity.

THE METHOD

Drawing on findings from two separate mixed methods studies, one which investigates 'Creativity and Assessment Practices in the Arts' (CAPA) and the other which explores 'Assessment of Composing at Key Stages 3 and 4 in English Secondary Schools', this paper reports on surveys and interviews with secondary school music teachers' current practice with regard to the assessment of creativity in their classroom assessment practices and of composing in particular at key stages 3 and 4. The studies (funded by the University of Cambridge, Birmingham City University, Manchester Metropolitan University and Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music), triangulate three sources of data comprising questionnaires, interviews and collected artefacts.

Two separate research studies took place, one on a nationwide basis in England and the other on a regional basis in the South East Region of England. The research was conducted over 18 months, between 2008 and 2010, and collected a wide range of data using mixed-method research design involving over 300 survey respondents from rural communities to inner cities.

Informed by the framework of Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), each study employed a combination of qualitative data collected by *interviews* (and *contextual observations)* and the development of an on-line *survey,* distributed via email to key music personnel across a range of secondary schools across five local education authorities.

Data collection methods

Instruments across both studies included:

• *Observations*: Each class was observed, and where possible involved some presentation of pupils' work, primarily for familiarization with the schools, teachers and students and contextualising the interview questions and analysis**.**

• *Interviews*: These included face-to-face individual interviews with the teachers and group interviews with the students from four schools (two primary and two secondary in the East region of England) and provided visual and documentary evidence of good assessment practice in creativity-rich arts programmes. Datasets included transcriptions involving 8 focus group interviews of student group in which further visual-based construct elicitation techniques were explored along with questions relating to the challenges and common practices of assessment in music that were characterised by inherently creative processes and products. The data sets also included transcriptions of interviews with 6 secondary teachers of the focus students. This resulted in approximately 12 hours of interview data for transcription.

• *Work samples/artefacts*: Integral to the design was the collection of documentation of teachers' practices and the inclusion of assessment tasks, work samples, teacher-developed tests, portfolios, critiques, sketchbooks and checklists reflecting the emphasis of assessment of pupil work in music composition, improvisation, performance and listening tasks.

• *Survey*: Following the completion of the analysis of interviews, the questionnaire was designed and developed over the four months following the data collection and analysis of the interviews, artefacts and literature. The questionnaire was piloted utilising a review of expert teachers and by feedback from a group of teachers who participated in the in qualitative phase of the project. The questionnaire included background variables as well as statements (3-5 items per concepts for the development of latent variables) developed from the results of the qualitative study and the literature. After finalising the questionnaire, it was emailed to 40 schools recruited to the CAPA project from five south eastern English counties (Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk) and reaching approximately 120 music teachers, aiming for a 50% response rate for appropriate statistical analysis, across East Anglia) who teach music in secondary schools for the purpose of gaining more views of practitioners on 'creativity' as a construct in the assessment of music.

• *Sampling criteria*: The criteria used for selection of schools were: (i) a willingness to be involved in the project for the duration of this pilot; (ii) a range of contexts to be represented in the overall sample: urban/rural; small/large; different specialism and Arts Mark status; (iii) cases who have been identified as leaders in developing 'good' assessment practices in a range of primary and secondary schools across a diversity of communities; and (iv) teachers who have been able to juggle policy and practice in the radically changing context of the English education system, by reputation or recommended by the LA Inspectorate.

A SYNTHESIS OF THE CONTENT

Findings from both studies analysed separately and in re-analysis together reveal aspects of the broad relationships between teachers constructed conceptions 'creativity' and what teachers do with regard to assessment of creativity in music generally and composing in particular in secondary school music practices. A *synthesis of the findings* concern i. the impact of performativity agendas and the wider political contexts within which music education is currently being delivered; ii. lack of a clear and shared understanding of what constitutes 'creativity' in music; and iii. teachers' (and pupils') continuing struggles with assessment on a number of fronts simultaneously. In addition:

• Whilst the normal mode for teaching and learning composing is in groups, there is no adequate associated mechanism which allows for assessment of either the contribution of the individual, or the achievement of the group.

• Whilst group composing is the norm, functional or theoretical understandings of what cognitively distributed composing practices involve have not kept pace with this.

• The transition from group composing to individuated composing has not been clearly conceptualised.

• It is not clear what a composing skill is. This being the case, developing them is concomitantly problematic.

• The notion of creative responses (particularly in composing) is by no means clear.

• Official English National Curriculum levels are not always found to be helpful in terms of charting progression, and are being used for the purpose of assessing individual pieces of work, for which they were never intended. This is problematic for teachers

• Possibly because the English National Curriculum levels exits, few other tools are utilised by teachers in assessing composing at KS3 or creativity at all.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusions and implications from the meta-analysis include a consideration of the differentiated nature of *what* creativity might mean in relation to classroom-based assessment of music, *where* assessment of creativity in music can be practiced and *how* (i.e. possibilities for alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and) creativity assessment can be operationalised in secondary school music. There are implications for the policy context in England, as assessment of creativity instantiated in classroom composing has been found to problematic from a teaching and learning perspective.

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