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# Communication, collaboration and creativity: how musicians negotiate a collective 'sound'

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## Introduction

Studies of collective rehearsal for musical performance are relatively scarce; reflecting both the paucity of interest within music education research, in *creative* rather *reproductive* musical activities and the enduring emphasis on composition as a solitary rather than a collective, community-based process (Young, 2008). Furthermore, as Sawyer and DeZutter (2009) have noted, even though there has been a wave of research that has recognised how creativity is embedded in social groups (e.g. Sawyer, 2006) and how creative products emerge from collaboration (p. 81) we still have very little understanding of the processes whereby creative products emerge from groups:

*'The most substantial studies of group creativity have been social psychological studies of brainstorming groups...but these studies have not analysed the interactional processes that occur within groups. This failure to analyse collaborative processes is a significant lacuna in creativity research because a wide range of empirical studies has revealed that significant creations are almost always the result of complex collaborations' (Sawyer and DeZutter, 2009, p.81).*

One of our aims in this chapter is therefore to underscore the case that we should be studying these processes - both to advance our understanding of the nature of collaborative music making and 'imagining' and collaborative creativity more generally.

A second aim is to suggest the suitability of sociocultural theory and discourse analysis as the basis for making such analyses, with the emphasis on the shared historical knowledge of communities (in this case, of musical genres and practices) and the importance of language and other communicative tools for pursuing and achieving common goals. To this end, in this chapter we will exemplify how sociocultural discourse analysis can shed light on: (1) the processes by which musicians negotiate musical common knowledge; (2) the significance of disputes and conflicts in the pursuit of common goals; (3) how influences are fused and connected to produce a distinctive and unique ‘sound’ and (4) how language is used in conjunction with other modes to produce a persuasive ‘discourse’ in joint preparation for musical performance.

We will draw on audio-recorded material and field notes from observational studies of a series of rehearsals by three bands of musicians. All three bands were similar in that they were working to create new, distinctive performance repertoires. That is, they were not aiming to perform accurate representations of established musical arrangements, as would a classical ensemble or a popular ‘covers’ band. Rather they all wanted to offer a distinctive ‘sound’ in their performances (even if performing compositions created by others). The musical genres within which they were working also offered some opportunity for improvisation and renegotiation of arrangements through the rehearsal process. Moreover, all three were concerned with creating music which was not just instrumental, but was (at least in part) the accompaniment to a vocal performance. One is a rock band consisting of five members, four male and one female aged about 15 years (whose activities are discussed in more detail in Miell and Littleton, 2008). The second is a group of three male adult musicians (average age about 45) preparing to accompany the staging of a musical play. The third is a band of four members, three male and one female, (average age about 52) who play country/roots music. Members of the first band were amateurs, while those of the two other bands were semi-professional. Transcripts from these case studies were specifically selected to explore the processes implicated in collaborative, creative music-making. Names in all transcripts are pseudonyms, and some other small details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Socio-cultural research and discourse analysis**

The work being reported is framed within the socio-cultural tradition (which sees creative processes as dynamic, fundamentally social and necessarily collective and collaborative). The term 'sociocultural' has become associated with research which draws explicitly on the developmental psychology of Lev Vygotsky (1978; see also Wertsch, 1985a, b; Daniels 2001). It represents an approach in which language is considered a 'cultural tool' implicated in the construction of understanding and the negotiation of meaning. Sociocultural research is not a unified field, but those within it recognise that the nature of human activity is that knowledge is shared and people jointly construct understandings of shared experience. Communicative events are shaped by cultural and historical factors, and thinking, learning and development cannot be understood without taking account of the intrinsically social and communicative nature of human life. From a sociocultural perspective, then, humans are seen as creatures who have a unique capacity for communication and whose lives are normally led within groups, communities and societies based on shared 'ways with words' ways of thinking, social practices and tools for getting things done.

Many human activities involve not just the sharing of information and the coordination of social interaction, but also a joint, dynamic engagement with ideas amongst partners. When working together, we do not only interact, we 'interthink' (Mercer, 2000; Mercer and Littleton 2007). Some sociocultural researchers have investigated how, in particular encounters or through a series of related encounters, two or more people use language to combine their intellectual resources in the pursuit of a common task. Good examples would include Middleton and Edwards' (1990) study of collective remembering, Elbers' (1994) research on children's play and that of O'Connor and Michaels (1996) on the orchestration of classroom group discussions.

All conversations are, to varying extents, founded on the establishment of a base of common knowledge and necessarily involve the creation of more shared understanding. Conversational partners use language (and other modes of meaning-making) to travel together from the past into the future, mutually transforming the current state of their understanding of the topic(s) of their conversation. To do so, they need to build a contextual foundation for the progress of their talk; talk is also the

prime means for building that contextual foundation. Gee and Green (1998) refer to this aspect of language use as 'reflexivity'. If one is interested in how talk is used to enable joint activity, one must be concerned with the ways that shared knowledge is both invoked and created in dialogue. It also requires a concern for how knowledge is developed as a joint resource over time – for example through a series of rehearsals, or even through the whole 'life' of a performing band. For reasons of space, however, we are not able to pursue this temporal aspect of the nature of joint musical performance here.

Nevertheless, drawing on the methods of socio-cultural discourse analysis (see Mercer, 2004 and Mercer and Littleton, 2007), and informed by multi-modal analysis (Kress, 2010) we will offer an analysis of recordings of the talk and other forms of interaction in rehearsal sessions. This is a methodology we have developed through studies of the joint construction of 'common knowledge' in classrooms and similar settings (Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Mercer and Littleton, 2007). 'Sociocultural' discourse analysis differs from 'linguistic' discourse analysis in being less concerned with the organisational structure of spoken language, and more with its content, function and the ways shared understanding is developed, in social context, over time. As with ethnography and conversation analysis, reports of such research are usually illustrated by selected extracts of transcribed talk, to which the analyst provides a commentary.

Of course, if we are to understand and characterise collaborative creativity in the context of musical practice, we need to examine not only the talk amongst band members but also the ways that other non-verbal means and cultural tools (including playing music) are used to constitute and sustain such activity. Language is part of a multimodal toolkit for thinking collectively - which is shaped by the practices of communities. The discourses of particular domains or communities of practice have distinctive forms - which have to be learned by novices. The playing of music may not only be the end product of rehearsal, but also a mode of communication amongst band members which enables and sustains the rehearsal process. Human communication is commonly multimodal, so that conversation often involves the use of gestures, changes in voice pitch, the use of artifacts and so on as well as word meanings. As Kress (2010) explains, different modes have *inherent affordances* and

acquire (through historical shaping) *special functions*. Meanings in any mode are interwoven (in use) with those of others to produce a more global meaning. Modes are thus *networks of interrelated options for making signs*. We offer a brief comparison of the modes of spoken language and music in Table 1 below, with some illustrative affordances and functions of each (the lists are not claimed to be comprehensive). We will discuss aspects this in relation to our examples below.

<b>Mode</b>	Talk	Music
<b>affordances</b>	Explicit presentation of ideas Flexible adaptability to specific contexts and to shared, specialized purposes of a community	Expression of tonal and temporal relations Flexible adaptability to specific contexts (such as those of specific ensembles) and to shared, culturally-based aesthetic norms
<b>Special functions</b> (in band rehearsal settings)	Management of social relations Invocation of past shared experiences Direct instruction by one participant to others Presentation of plans and arguments for change Rhetorical efforts to pursue individual goals Accountability for performance	Demonstration of proposed musical features Testing of musical ideas in practice Demonstration of problematic aspects and possible solutions Demonstrations of 'correct' performance by one participant to another

*Table 1: Talk and music as modes of communication for joint activity*

## **Analysis**

The aim of our analysis has been to reveal the communicative processes which enable band rehearsals to take place and achieve the desired outcomes. We will use selected transcripts of talk recorded in rehearsals (supplemented by observational notes) to illustrate our findings.

Our analyses revealed that the band members we studied rehearsing were highly engaged, repeatedly playing, replaying and reworking songs, both new and old, in an attempt to reach collectively agreed versions and interpretations – which constitute a form of shared musical common knowledge. Such agreement was achieved through a complex transactional process in which the band members would continually evaluate their work, voicing their opinions on how particular pieces were working - offering ideas for improvement, modification and change as they played through pieces or reworked specific phrases. Members would frequently build musically on each others' ideas, playing through and exploring alternative versions and subtle variations. But they also needed to resolve differences of view, in order to reach a consensus to underpin their joint performance. This can be seen in Extract 1 '*Not sure about the E*', which comes from a rehearsal session of the band preparing to accompany a musical play. At the point it begins, the band members Norm, Peter and Kieran are reviewing a particular musical episode which would be played while characters interacted, at times without speaking or singing, during a scene which had proved to be of an uncertain duration. Norm plays guitar, Peter is on keyboards and Kieran is on bass. (There were other members of this ensemble, but they were not involved in this particular episode.) Part of the musical 'problem' they face is that the piece of music they are rehearsing has to function as an ambient accompaniment to an episode of dramatic interaction which has proved (in whole cast rehearsals) to have an uncertain length. Their immediate concerns are how to segue from one section of the play to the next, and how to make sure the music can be sustained flexibly in conjunction with the dramatic action. The band therefore needs a contingency plan for how to respond to the circumstances flexibly. The ambient piece also has to provide a musical device for moving from the key of one song (G, sung before the piece) to the next (A, sung after the piece). This musical episode had evolved, rather than being first formally written, in the course of the play rehearsals. Aspects of it were thus still open to negotiation. At this point, it had been proposed that a transition through the chord of E major would help make the key shift, during the ambient phase: and it is this proposal which is in dispute in Extract 1.

**Extract 1: Not sure about the E**

Norm: We put the E in, it makes it slightly odd (*sounding worried*)  
Peter: We've got to think in terms of words are concerned we only use, do that once at a time  
Norm: That's true  
Kieran: Yeh  
Peter: And then the, the long, the long A minors afterwards will simply be...  
Norm: Yeh  
Kieran: Yeh, we can actually keep those cycling round as many times as we need to  
Norm: I'm not sure about the E (*still sounds unconvinced*)  
Kieran: Right, OK  
Peter: I like it  
Norm: Yeh but except it's, because then you've got (*demonstrates on guitar*)  
Peter: Yeh but hang on, I'm using G instead of E minor  
Norm: Yeh Yeh, all right. Perhaps it works  
Kieran: Let's try that, it goes straight to the F (*they try it*)  
Kieran: Yeh I think it actually works on the same number of bars because we're holding the F and G twice as long  
Norm: Yeh  
Peter: That's right

We see Norm first expressing his concern about a choice of chord – 'E major' within the music. His reasons appear to be aesthetic – he doesn't like how it sounds in relation to the chords which precede or succeed it. His partners seem less concerned, with Peter seeming to argue for the relative unimportance of the issue in the context of the piece as a whole. Kieran joins in, but seems more concerned with the other issue of maintaining the music for a suitable time, rather than the problem chord. Norm and Peter then express strongly different views about the 'E'. Norm then supports his concerns with a musical demonstration of how he thinks the problem chord will sound in context. That is, Norm uses the music *rhetorically*, as an additional mode to support his spoken argument. He is thus using an affordance of musical demonstration as a mode of communication, to present a multimodal argument. This leads Peter to realise he had not been using the same chord as Norm to precede the 'E' ('G major' rather than 'E minor', each of which if played before E major creates a very different effect). Kieran suggests they try it, which they do; and



as a result a happy consensus is achieved. As can be seen, the band often discussed, gave reasons for and justified their particular preferences (in Norm's case, by using more than one communicative mode). However, sometimes it was the collective appeal of the sound that was critical, with relatively little explicit verbal appraisal accompanying the mutual recognition that something sounds 'right'. Music was thus not only the intended outcome of joint activity, but also a vital medium (used in conjunction with language to generate persuasive communications) through which the interdependent processes implicated in interpretation were constituted and negotiated. As we will go on to explain, our analyses suggest that this process of negotiating (using the modes of language, music and gesture) and establishing collectively agreed versions - shared musical common knowledge and understanding - could be a highly charged and deeply meaningful process for the band members. This is because the construction and negotiation of an agreed interpretation of a piece within their repertoire was inextricably interwoven with the negotiation of a distinctive band sound - a musical identity.

Then next sequence, 'A hard fill', come from a rehearsal of the country/roots band. Ivan is the main singer, and on guitar; Carl is also on guitar; Mac is on fiddle; Paula is on accordion; and Tom is on bass. As the extract begins, they have just been practising a song in which the accordion has to come in with a distinctive and precise run of notes (what is often called a 'fill' or 'riff') at a certain point in each verse.

### **Extract 2: A hard fill**

*(A song ends and people begin to talk)*

Mac: *(to Paula)* It's a hard bloody fill for you to do, that, isn't it?

I mean I wonder whether we...

Ivan: *(interrupts)* But it sounds...

Carl: *(interrupts)* When it works it's great

Mac: I mean I would simplify it

Tom: Yeah

Mac: *(to Paula)* I mean I think we're asking an awful lot of you to do that *(laughs)* and I wonder if we shouldn't just do something simpler. You know, um

Ivan: Well, for the first time out, trying in front of an audience, do something simple...

Mac: Yeah. Anyway, it's only an idea

Paula: At the Canyon (*referring to a music venue*)

Ivan: ...and then as we rehearse it more and more and get into it we increase the complexity...

Mac: I don't know what though, that's the point

Ivan: ...as you feel more comfortable

Paula: It's only two weeks. What I need is a reminder. I'd forgotten about that one. Since I looked at it I haven't...

Ivan: Well how do you feel about it? Can you fit it in?

Paula: Um, I feel (*long pause*)

Mac: It's a tricky one, isn't it? To get it really sharp.

Paula: It's showing cos I haven't practised. This should ease up by the end of next week, I've got a, I've got a (*inaudible*)

Mac: (*sings as plays notes of fill*) doo doo doo doooh. How about at the end of it, right, do the whole thing, slowly

Paula: (*plays original version of fill*)

Mac: You know (*plays just some of the notes*) If you could just do that

Paula: If that fits in better (*plays same notes as simplified version of fill*)

Mac: (*to whole band*) Do it

(*Band plays whole section of song*)

Carl: Hmm, it's (*inaudible*) (*Some people still playing*)

Paula: It's, it's the rhythm of doing it, to be honest.

Mac: I mean, just do something much simpler. I just really feel it's too hard to fit it in really sharply. I mean for me on the fiddle that is a doddle (*plays it*) cos it's all open strings, and you know

Paula: What's wrong, am I getting the rhythm wrong?

Mac: No. Sometimes. It's just sometimes it sounds like its slowing us down slightly when, you know, you know it doesn't seem like its kind of just keeping up. And...

Paula: To be honest, I haven't tried it since last week and therefore...

Ivan: (*interrupts*) Could it just be three notes? (*Sings an arpeggio, D, B, F*)

Mac: I was just thinking that (*plays*) I mean the other, the simple thing to do could be to kind of, uh, the chords, the thirds (*plays a sequence of pairs of notes which is less complex than the 'fill' in question*). You know.

(*This issue is not resolved, and the band move on to rehearse another tune*)

In this extract we see a delicate issue being raised and discussed, of a type which is not uncommon in band rehearsals. It is whether, in the view one of the performers, another performer is playing their part in a way which is satisfactory. We see Mac raising the issue concerning one 'fill' with Paula, and then pursuing it somewhat

relentlessly through this conversational extract. We might note that the essence of his position is that a less complex, 'simpler' series of notes might fill the slot in the arrangement better. Mac uses the terms 'simple/simpler/simplify' to repeatedly make this point. Ivan picks this up and uses 'simple' once, though Paula never does, though she does admit that the rhythm of the fill is posing problems. Her position, it seems, is that she just needs more practice with the arrangement as it is. As in Extract 1, musical demonstration is used by band members in a rhetorical way to support a multimodal argument. In this case, however, the argument is not carried by the demonstrations and the issue is not resolved. Nevertheless, this episode illustrates well the dynamic, multimodal, dialogic processes whereby issues of joint performance can be raised and pursued by members of an ensemble.

As we have already noted above, analysis of the interactions between band members often reveals that throughout their rehearsal time they are continually engaged in sustained joint evaluation and appraisal of their musical output and songs. Whilst such interactions between the band members are normally oriented towards achieving agreement and consensus concerning the 'sound' of particular songs, they may nevertheless be highly emotive and confrontational, with particular individuals sometimes being singled out for criticism. We can see a rather extreme example of this in Extract 3 below, from a rehearsal of the rock band. The evaluative language used in their rehearsals was frequently very direct and blunt, involving fierce critical commentary and frank assessment of the resultant 'vibe' or sound. Members sometimes engaged in what Storey and Joubert (2004: 46) have called 'lethal confrontations' in which they were intensely critical of each other's playing and creative contributions.

This confrontational dynamic can be seen in Extract 3, which comes from a rehearsal of the rock band. The band is working through a new piece and Dan is defending himself against Jack's accusatory comments that he is 'playing the wrong notes' and 'starting off on the wrong notes':

**Extract 3: Wrong notes**

Dan: Did you say I was playing the wrong notes?

Jack: Well yeah, maybe it just didn't sound right

Leah: Play it through just the two of you  
Jack: Let's just play it. . .  
Dan: I'm sure I was playing what I was playing before. . .  
Jack: . . . and I'll tell you if it sounds right.  
Dan: No it's not the tuning, it must be the notes but I was playing what I was playing before. . .  
Jack: . . . Well you can't have been man. . .  
Dan: . . . Well I am. . .  
Jack: . . . We would have heard man. . .  
Dan: . . . I swear, I swear.  
Jack: You start off with a wrong note  
Dan: I'm not!  
Jack: That's fucking. . . well it doesn't sound right does it!  
Dan: Well that's what I was playing before  
Jack: Well we've got to do something new  
Dan: Play it right the way through  
Jack: It sounds shit man  
*(The band try the same song again from beginning.)*

What is notable is that despite the intensity, the collaboration between the band members did not break down in these moments of vehement intensity. Rather, these conflicts were the very sites or moments within which creative 'breakthroughs' seemed to happen, or which fuelled subsequent useful rounds of re-working and re-playing as was the case here. Such 'breakthrough moments' in their collaborative creativity seemed to arise after quite lengthy periods of musical experimentation – where alternative versions were tried repeatedly – interspersed by intense, often emotive, phases of debate and evaluation. That said, the collective sense of something 'working' was often hard won and could at times be fragile, becoming unevenly felt by the collaborators.

As noted earlier, all three of the bands studied were, to varying extents, working in an improvisational manner, rather than seeking to achieve canonical performances as is the case within the classical tradition (McDonald *et al.*, 2004). But the rock band, in particular, worked as 'freestylers' (Kjeldgaard, 2006) not looking for any one existing

style to 'fit in to' but instead fusing, switching and making connections between established musical genres, experimenting with and borrowing from them in order to forge and define their own distinctive sound (and musical identity) through negotiating their creative conflicts and tensions. This notion of a distinctive group vibe or sound was a crucial mediator of the groups' collaborative work and one that was explicitly discussed, as in Extract 4 below.

**Extract 4: Bit too funky**

Jack: That bit's just not sounding right. . . It's sounding a bit too, like, I don't know a bit too funky almost, in a way

Matt: I don't know, it changes the vibe a bit

Jack: Changes?

Matt: Just the mood of the band

Jack: I know but that's not necessarily a good thing

Matt: Yeah I know

This musical (identity) work was at least partly resourced by their repeated experimentation and their acknowledgement of versions of a song or particular musical motifs as being provisional 'musical works in progress' – works that simultaneously embody the progress made and provide the focus for progressive and ongoing work as collaborators negotiate their desired sound. In Extract 4, sounds that change the vibe and the mood of the band are rejected as 'not right', even though they might have some merit. This claiming of a distinctive sound was very important to this band. They were keen to acknowledge the key influences on their work, recognising that their sound embodies a fusion of influences, but being careful not to appear derivative, as illustrated by Extract 5.

**Extract 5: Refreshingly different**

Jack: If you take completely different bands like we do and you amalgamate something. . . then it completely changes it. So if I've got the bare bones of a song and let's say it's in a certain style like in the style of the band called Swans. Then we'll bring it and Dan will bring a certain influence like some sort of post-rock thing which he has been doing and Matt will bring a heavy kind of beat and Leah will bring sort of quirky weird things. . . and everything comes together.

Matt: It's hard to label the sort of music. I mean I don't know, I haven't heard any bands that sound like us.

Dan: It's refreshingly different I would say.

## **Discussion**

We suggest that more needs to be understood about the interactional processes of creative collaboration, in music and other artistic spheres of activity. We also suggest that the potential of sociocultural theory and discourse analysis as a basis for the analyses of joint creative activity could usefully be explored further. The analytic work presented here has show how such collective creative activity is predicated on the shared historical knowledge of communities (in this case, of musical genres and practices) and the use of language as a cultural and psychological tool which is used with other communicative tools for pursuing and achieving both personal agendas and common goals. We have also seen how the processes of musical interpretation and musical identity construction are inextricably interwoven and mutually constitutive. What is lacking in our presentation here is an adequate recognition of how the cognitive and social resources for 'rehearsing together' are accumulated and refined over time through the very nature of the spiral of repeated rehearsal and performance, within which some process of reflective review will normally also take place. The cultural bases for musical practice, not only for professional musicians but for the amateurs and semi-professionals described here, are complex and important for understanding the processes involved. (See for example Finnegan's (2007) classic anthropological study of non-professional musicians in the same English town as two of the bands which feature in our study.) But if at least part of the nature of musical activity is accurately represented by our analysis, then it implies that such creative collaborations are of some significance and consequence to musicians, both established and aspiring. This in turn implies that the importance of such collaborative activity, and the communication skills which achieve it, need to be recognized not only in research on music making but also in music education.

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