

Collaborative Teaching/Teaching Collaboration: Reflections on a Method

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the personal and professional experience in co-leading an electroacoustic composition course in **Art Zoyd Studios**, a professional studio environment in Valenciennes, France for the last nine years. Considering how this has involved collaborative teaching and teaching collaboration to students, I contrast the terms *real world* and *academia* (n.b. neither are meant to be pejorative or mutually exclusive in this project). There is an attempt to scale this successful experience into HE particularly within the context of the Brunel School of Arts Music Subject.

Keywords: PDAP, collaboration, collaborative teaching, co-teaching, co-learning, music composition, real world, academia

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This project considers the issue of preparing university students for *real world* situations through the creation of collaborative environments — collaborative teaching for teaching collaboration. While the subject here is music and students of music, scalability of the method is encouraged. Whether the words ‘cooperation’ or ‘collaboration’ are used, the definition is a general one, as defined in the Collins English Dictionary, *of working together on a task to achieve shared goals*. It is also, in my experience, *working together to create what would be impossible to create alone*. I take the experience I have as a professionally active composer, computer musician and teacher and propose a possible implementation of what I do outside the university to a method that is “university ready”. I am researching an approach to teaching and learning within the context of a typical university environment through the inclusion of collaborative and multi-mentored teaching techniques as demonstrated in music apprenticeships everywhere but missing from, or maladjusted for, *academia*.

More than twenty years of professional experience in several countries and cultures has provided a foundation of real world experience within which the project is based. The many forms of collaboration, the importance of the ability to collaborate, the growing use of collaborative tools and the need to collaborate effectively, and to do so with the latest technology, are all valid reasons to study and implement some form of collaborative learning in the university. More importantly, creative collaboration is what we do as professionals. At all levels of our vocation we are called upon to collaborate in low and high levels of involvement. While collaborative activity within this paper is ostensibly music-based, it is not exclusive to music and is also being developed, notably through technology and the internet, in other professions and activities.

Collaborative teaching may involve directly teaching students to collaborate on a common project. This involves a large amount of practical and logistical activity as well as creative work between collaborators. Sharing this activity with students has an impact that is unquantifiable, though real and far reaching in implications and impact. Practical considerations, such as planning and professional activity, are important parameters in any common artistic project and developing a high degree of collegiality (inherent in collaboration) is a non-negligible characteristic developed through collaboration. In other

words, we are constantly working together (i.e. communicating, or redefining projects) and towards a unique creative activity .

A nine year period (2005-2013) of a collaborative teaching and learning experience in **Art Zoyd Studios** with French composer André Serre-Milan and this author is examined for the practical development of a collaborative method and the possible implementation in academia.

Academia and the Real World: Faux amis?

Some definitions: “real world” as defined in Webster’s Dictionary is *the realm of practical or actual experience, as opposed to the abstract, theoretical, or idealised sphere of the classroom, laboratory, etc.* “Academia” as defined in Webster’s Dictionary is *the life, community, or world of teachers, schools, and education.* Why is it necessary to define the former by opposition, in effect, to the latter? It is not a goal to put this into opposition in this paper. I place them in different realms of activity with some overlap – sometimes – like a Venn diagram but with ever-changing sets. I’d like to develop a method that makes that overlap more useful and, maybe, more powerful for students and teachers. As it stands, though, there is little real-world experience available to students.

There is a 2nd-year module, that is a form of professional experience or placement for students. The idea is that we give them some experience in what it means to put on a concert in a venue. This venue is within the university. People attending this venue are students. The result is that the real-world activity has been experienced in a laboratory – and while there are real world laboratories, music culture lives outside that kind of containment.

What makes a musician? How does one bring someone from being a student to being a musician? There are some objective criteria observable in this process (i.e. theoretical understanding of various composition techniques, knowledge of historical repertoire). There is also a certain quality of being a musician that is more obscure. The passage from student of music to musician is different for every student. The more practical real world experience a student can get, the better – it can only help them arrive to the state of being musician. Music making is an extremely social activity. To make music, you have to play with others. Even composers, despite the romanticised myth and the ivory towers, are in need of keen

social skills to have anything remotely reassembling a career. We learn to work together with others in music schools, at the university and in conservatories. Working together is part of collaboration, but it is not the defining element of what collaboration *is*. Collaborating to create is a real world activity that all musicians will be called upon to do as soon as they walk out of the halls of academia.

Putting on a concert in the university is not, and can never be, the same as the real world activity of putting on a concert. In many ways it is the perfect example of why you can't do what you need to do inside the university to prepare students for outside the university. If everything goes wrong in the university centred concert, the worst that can happen is you get a bad mark. If all goes well, you get a good mark (I am only slight exaggerating for effect here). The concert outside will not be graded the same way, and the consequences are more likely to be life-changing. And while assessing within the closed environment is easier, it is not necessarily better. Impetus and inspiration will be different in a real world environment and attitudes change while perspective is developed.

Pierre Boulez writes in *Points de repère (Vol. 3) Leçons de musique* "Qu'est-ce donc que la musique ? À la fois un art, une science et un artisanat." (So, then, what is music? It is at once an art, a science and a craft.) Part of what a musician learns to do is perfectly taught in the classroom: theory, harmony, counterpoint, history and repertoire may all be taught and assessed within a typical university system. (Though I would argue there is a better way to do this with a more "holistic" approach.) This is the 'science' of music. It is also part of the craft to which Boulez refers to, but not all craft can be taught in the classroom. Art is also not learned in the university (or anywhere?). These characteristics are best shared by mentors, guides, teachers.

The university degree programme is based on modules that have been carefully constructed and vetted for maximum clarity and effect. There is a very clear effort to keep the student experience straight-lined, avoiding confusion and anything that can not be clearly defined. This is important and should not be brought into question. There is, however, a real benefit in guiding students through an experience that is harder to define and assess. an experience that is more relevant to what they will be faced in the jobs market. An analogy to this can be seen by comparing commonly seen London Underground map as

developed and presented by Transport for London. It is a stylised and idealised representation of what is in reality something that is much less organised and, in some instances, bearing little resemblance to the idealised map. While the idealised version is arguably easier to understand, it does not correctly show the interrelations and real perspective of the actual map, or, one might argue, it does show *exactly* the interrelations, *at the expense* of the real geography!

Finally, it is one thing to talk about collaboration and another truly to implement it in the programme. We often use the word ‘collaboration’ to describe teaching in groups or co-teaching to special-needs classes. This is not what is meant by collaboration here. There is a very strong element of creation, even at the teaching level, that is not present in the above-mentioned teaching methods. It is an all-involving somewhat sweaty and dirty activity. Douglas B. Reeves in *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Results* writes “Collaboration, it turns out, is not a gift from the gods but a skill that requires effort and practice.” One learns a skill and fine tunes it over time. We collaborate as musicians. We should be, as teachers, working this collaboration into a programme to prepare students for working outside the classroom. With time, experience and exposure students become practising musicians in the real world.

Real world examples

Art Zoyd Studios (a non profit association and music group), Valenciennes France, may be found in the building next to the city's music conservatory. In 2005 it was decided to start a composition class in electro-acoustic music. French composer and teacher André Serre-Milan was hired to lead the class and I, along with the director of the conservatory and the director of Art Zoyd, Gérard Hourbette, would collaborate together in leading the course. The class was to run for 9 months and we had decided early to have a concert or other public spectacle at the end of the course. There were many unknowns, including the calibre and background of students who would be applying. In the end, we had a mix of students from the conservatory, the fine arts school of Valenciennes, a mix of university and independent students applying for the course. There were more or less 19 students (we had drop outs and drop ins during the year) with ages ranging from 16 to 29. Some were musicians – either amateurs or conservatory trained – but all wanted to learn about electro-

acoustic music composition. A small number of students came from Lille, some 40 minutes away, and Brussels or Mons in Belgium as *Art Zoyd* is known for its cross-border activity.

Apart from some brief lectures by the two directors, Serre-Milan and I would be collaborating together to lead the course. Meetings were every two to three weeks over a two to three day period. Then there were three longer periods (national education holidays) during the year with up to 5 days of continuous class meetings. These longer periods engendered a level of camaraderie difficult to reproduce in any academic environment.

The class, as we would call it, would have several aspects, pedagogical and otherwise. This was a new endeavour for the studio and had not been, to our knowledge, tried anywhere else before either (not in France at least). The *raison d'être* of creating this class was multiple, including the public interest or marketing aspect for the studio, a long-term pedagogical appeal (in terms of years but also in terms of depth of study), contract fulfilment with state funding bodies, developing relations with the city and, as always and (for me) more importantly, the joy in creating something (this aspect is worth noting and would be a topic for further discussion).

We immediately decided that there would be some form of music theatre to the spectacle (in the German sense of the term), that each student would be presenting their work within the context of a singular overarching piece and that we needed to find a method for this to work on the artistic and aesthetic level as well as the technical and logistical side. We divided roles, in what seemed natural and practical, into what we were competent in doing. We led the class in our specialities but we also shared the leading during presentations or lectures: I could interject on a work in the repertoire while Serre-Milan would interject in my lecture on music programming languages (for example).

I had already collaborated with André Serre-Milan on a work together in 2003. We knew each other and shared many ideas, though we differ on just as many. This comes out in the class. Students see this and can react to it in many ways, most notable in the method of critical analysis and discussion in their work as they are presented in a forum. Discussion is developed and guided, but everyone has their say. Works of repertoire are discussed and presented by one or the other of us, but are discussed often differing perspectives (very real

world), this tends to give the students the signal that discussion and dissension (from prevalent opinions or views) are welcome. There is a noticeable move by students towards independence of thought and action during these sessions. There may be many parentheses and tangents: we might spend a session talking about aspects of the music business or the merits of the last pop music diva. While there is a general outline to the course, the most important aspects are the creation with presentation of a new work. Whenever a topic is discussed, it has been instigated through the prism of the controlling idea that is the show. The show is the focus of the work.

It is, finally, the show that encompasses and influences the pedagogical aspects and the developmental aspects of the class. There is, in this one relatively short space of time, the time of show, everything musical entwined. Not only do you need to know how to play an instrument, or to make sound on a computer, you need to know many of the technical aspects of why this works the way it does and what happens when it doesn't work – and why. There are many moments of failure in the creating of a show, but these are the defining moments and the place where everything comes together: not just the technical, not just the theoretical, not just the creative idea, not just the social camaraderie, not just for the CV. This is for real with a real-world theatre and real-world people waiting for some form of creative work to be presented. The result has invariably been that the students grow in leaps and bounds during the last sessions, but the most impressive transformations comes after the show. This is a unique experience that forces one to a level of achievement by the needs of creation.

That first-year class has served as a model for the following years. There are now three years (or cycles) possible in the programme. Every year there are different students coming in with extremely different backgrounds, and very different needs and aspirations. We can adapt, because of the format of the course, to anyone (at least that has been the case up to now).

There is a final setup and rehearsal in the space where this will be performed: the National Theatre in Valenciennes or a theatre in the Mons, Belgium, or one of the festivals in either city. These are theatres open to the general public and the concert may be part of the organiser's season. There is nothing, in my experience, more advantageous for learning

than putting your creation to the test before a public – especially if this public is not made up of your friends or family. There are examples of students presenting their works after the end of their course in other contexts (university projects, independent concerts, festivals). There are also a number of students that have gone on to finish their studies and work in universities or studios nationally and internationally.

An important and highly commendable aspect of this method includes the adaptability to individual students' needs; every year the program is ostensibly the same but may differ wildly according to the various backgrounds and needs of the students. There is a shared goal with shared duties for the leaders of the program but also for the students. This does not mean that everything is taught by two, but that the responsibility is shared and duties are defined according to the abilities and interests of the teacher, as well as the needs of that particular year or class. The final result is a whole made up of the parts that each student has brought to the class, formed by the guidance and leadership of the teachers.

Typical sessions are constructed around three-day periods every two weeks for five or six months. This is variable and will depend on the groups planning. Each day is broken down into two four-hour blocks. It is this continuous and immersive quality that has a real and immediate effect on the students. Below is a generalised presentation of a typical course. This will vary, though, as will the general makeup of the class as 2nd and 3rd year students are taught within the schedule.

Days 1–3. Presentations of students and teachers, listening to repertoire, analytic discussions of works, context; historical importance is presented and debated. There are typically one or two recording sessions with everyone within the first few days of each course. The recorded material is then used throughout the course for personal projects. Students are encouraged to use any of the sounds recorded.

Days 4–6. Notions of digital/ computer science theory will be followed by first steps with an audio sequencing program – typically this is the industry standard Avid ProTools audio and MIDI sequencer. Workshops on more advanced technology and programming environments (Max, Processing, Arduino boards, external controllers and sensors).

Days 7–9. Project presentation by all students. The students need to define what they want their projects to be (at this point there may not be any discussion of what the final overall work will be). There will be an assessment of technical feasibility and artistic viability shared between teachers and students. We give thorough advice on each project with reference to works in the repertoire and what we advise, artistically and technically, for advancing the project. This is a long process and can take up more than an hour per project.

Days 10–12. First steps in their development of a work and in-depth analysis of this advice on where to go with it (or start over). This last process is repeated with one or both of us listening and advising as well as taking input from all participants. Personal tutorials follow for focus on the particular needs of each individual project.

Days 13–15, 16–18. There will be a concentration on projects at the individual level while a general form for the final global project starts to take shape. Classes are taught together in a semi-circular configuration. Everyone can see everyone else. Projects (i.e. sewing machine instruments, typewriter based concertos, *Kinect* real-time video sensors in choreographic collaborations) are presented, critiqued and developed through each session.

The final 4four or five5 sessions are spent in practicals and rehearsals. Each student is responsible for preparing a technical rider and understanding what is necessary from every angle of their project (sounds, light, video, scenography, etc.). We will have scheduled meetings with the technical director of the theatre where the work will be performed. Posters are made, brochures are sent out and programs are written. Then the final rehearsals and the concert take place.

While each year is different, the overall impression is one of a cycle. Learning theory, repertoire and history, developing craft and technique through hands on workshops, developing collegiality unique to music, working together towards a common goal, to create something impossible to imagine without this level of collaboration.

Conclusion: Making this work at Brunel

The enduring quality of the course is a statement to its popularity among the participants as is the interest of various universities in France and Belgium to send students to attend courses in Valenciennes. There is an undeniable real-world experience to be had

with such a course which leads to knowledge transfer, confidence building, long term impact, self criticism and, yes, a certain pride in having completed from start to finish the creation of something that was not there before; the students' creation exists only because of this particular kind of collaboration.

The process of collaboration in teaching the class is one that offers new approaches every year in preparing the balance between course and performance. The possibility to exchange roles, individually or collaboratively field questions from students, develop new working plans and construct anew the form of the final performance every year is something that does require a certain amount of close attention and flexibility. The result, I believe, is very much worth the work. As professional practitioners, we gain experience every year which is then transferred to the students and which, more often than not, will be reflected in the performance though new technology or through our research preoccupations (an example of research led teaching).

There are two important caveats to this method of teaching collaboration: a certain number of years of experience are necessary to carry this off well, and there needs to be an amiable chemistry between the collaborators. We have seen younger students leave the class and try their hand at the same collaborative method in university or ad hoc workshops, with less than acceptable outcomes. It might also be uncomfortable for younger colleagues to be placed in situations of real precocity needing to improvise responses to constantly, and sometimes rapidly, evolving teaching and working conditions. At the other extreme, there might very well be a competition that starts between the collaborators that would be harmful to students. At the university level this should be controlled and reviewed regularly. The chemistry between collaborators is important both for the teachers and for the students. This need not be fully comparable, but a certain quality that is part of collaborative acuity would be absolutely necessary.

In considering the case for the students, I can see nothing that would hinder this method. The more varied their backgrounds, the better the overall project would potentially be in the end. Indeed, this opens up the possibility of having students from other programmes and schools within the university take part in the class. I strongly believe that

this would yield creative output beyond any one quantifiable outcome in non-collaborative courses.

The method of collaboration in both teaching and learning developed during the nine years of composition sessions at Art Zoyd Studios is rewarding, highly suitable to the wildly varied background of the students, creatively and artistically variable with long-term impact for participants including the teachers. The difficulty in bringing this model to the School of Arts at Brunel, or any HE institution for that matter, is primarily one of regulatory statutes. As it stands, there is no degree awarded at the end of the Art Zoyd course. There are no marks or other assessments. There is no board of exams or external moderation. The work is peer assessed and publicly judged. This would need to be thoroughly reviewed and rethought to bring the course into the university as it now stands. There are other non trivial but resolvable difficulties in initiating such a course at the university: the problem of awarding individual grades for collaborative work and how to incorporate this in senate regulations, and the question of timetabling given that students are doing other modules. That being the case, I have already started in to incorporate certain elements of this method in the newly devised Sonic Arts modules. Years 2 and 3 are being taught by both myself and my colleague Harald Muenz, a composer with many years' composing and teaching experience. I have also, since arriving at Brunel, insisted on live performance of student projects. While this was not a requirement for the modules in place when I arrived, I did make a case that this would be the perfect form of validation for each project. In the process of bringing their projects up to performance standards, students need to work with one another and develop a certain level of collegiality as well as the ability to collaborate. While this is far from the course I imagine, it is a start.

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