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Redefining excellence and inclusion

ABSTRACT

In this article, we present an overview and summary of the work undertaken by the Music and Social Intervention Network. Exploring the themes of 'excellence' and 'inclusion', we begin with a consideration of the four articles presented within this special issue and then proceed onto a reflection surrounding wider discussions prevalent at the public events held as part of the project. Following this, we outline five key discourses that emerged through the research process: value, context, measurement, process/product and pedagogy. These fields were then used to identify three underlying issues that affect the way the concepts of excellence and inclusion manifest. After proposing a common understanding of the terms under scrutiny, we suggest that the research points towards a reformation that reads: excellence is the process within community music and inclusion is the product of that process. Reflective questions pertaining to this idea are left open for further discussion.

KEYWORDS

intervention
pedagogy
music
product
process
values

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1. https://learn.rcm.ac.uk/courses/1240/pages/jh-perspectives?module_item_id=4723. Accessed 26 May 2020.
2. <https://learn.rcm.ac.uk/courses/1240/pages/lh-perspectives>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

INTRODUCTION

We began this project as an investigation into the ideas surrounding 'inclusion' and 'excellence' and how they manifest through musicians' working practices in contemporary society. The impetus for this enquiry was located in our own experience as music educators working in a variety of formal and non-formal contexts. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant provided us with an opportunity to gather a core group of researchers and practitioners engaged in participatory music-making and create a space for dialogue. Importantly, these discussions were understood as starting points that would lead to three public events where the ideas were debated across the wider research and practice community. This became known as MUSOC, the Music and Social Intervention Network. The following article considers some of the connections, intersections and tensions that arose from the MUSOC project. We begin with a consideration of the four articles presented within this special issue then proceed onto a reflection surrounding the discussions prevalent at the three public events. Following this, we move towards our key findings and conclusions offering some thoughts on future directions.

THE ARTICLES

As a collection, the four articles presented in this special issue of the *International Journal of Community Music (IJCM)* not only reflect key themes that arose throughout the duration of the project but also resonate with the interests of the authors involved. The areas of discussion revolve around intervention, power, impact, application and context. From our analysis, the interpersonal aspect of making music with people was a theme that stood out. This supported a general idea that music can play an important role in connecting people in meaningful ways. Thoughts moved from the micro, friendships between individuals, to the larger potential of 'providing a window on a different way of being that might illuminate a path towards a different way of how we might co-exist' (Camlin et al. 2020). As a relational force music was understood as a 'powerful forum for learning and flourishing' (Anderson and Willingham 2020) but we were also reminded that there are always in-balances of power that 'surfaced through relationships' (Currie et al. 2020). Over the last couple of years, community music as an 'intervention' has provided a productive space through which to consider its practice and consequently the facilitators' role within any given music-making relationship. After analysing the discussions and responses to the first event, we realized that to get underneath the overarching issues relating to relationships and power we needed to interrogate the concept of intervention.¹ To simulate debate Lee posted a provocation to the core group stating that:

Over recent years, describing community music as an active intervention has become a common way to articulate the processes by which music leaders or facilitators engage with participants. As the field expands globally it is now time to reassess the use of this term in order to deepen our understanding of what community music does, what it can be, and what it is.²

Two key questions were posed: what is the implication when using the term intervention? Is the notion of intervention apt for a growing global field? Within the articles, authors respond to these questions in very different ways

often reflecting ‘a multi-modal approach to communicating the intention of music interventions’ (Currie et al. 2020). Intervention is a deliberate strategy and as such calls for informed decision making: ‘[m]y decision to make music in workshop contexts through an interventionist practice is underpinned by a conscious intention to challenge existing structures that maintain distribution of music resources and platforms for the few’ (Currie et al. 2020). Thinking around the intended agency towards action brought our authors in dialogue with what it means to have the ‘power’ within a facilitator–participant relationship. Discussions provide some thinking around understanding power differently noting that ‘it might be a good idea to move away from seeing power as something [...] good or bad, and right or wrong’ (Ansdell et al. 2020). Through these discussions Ansdell et al. (2020) consider Foucault’s work in moving away from power as something that someone possesses, but rather towards something that operates within interventions, in relations and in organizations, whilst Anderson and Willingham (2020) consider Bourdieu’s ideas pertaining to the underlying belief that human agency creates change within a context or setting.

As a contemporary topic, thoughts surrounding intervention touched on its association with two other ubiquitous words in the community music lexicon, empowerment and transformation. Within some discussions, the authors felt there was a tension between strategies of music engagement and outcome-driven arts funding. One author notes, ‘destinations and outcomes are set in advance of the work and to this end, I recognize my complicity in a disempowering practice’ (Currie et al. 2020). Other authors were uncomfortable with the term ‘intervention’ and asked whether it was ethical (Ansdell et al. 2020). Throughout the dialogues, issues of creating ‘safe spaces’ within interventions and operationalizing interventions as ‘invitations’ and ‘dialogue’ rather than top-down directives can have the effect of a two-sided or two-way process. Conceiving the participant and facilitator this way has a greater potential to foster impactful experiences.

The importance of understanding the impact of research in a ‘multi-directional way’ was also highlighted (Camlin et al. 2020). Recognizing that the notion of ‘measuring’ impact can be somewhat controversial in the music and the arts, Camlin et al. (2020) explore the possibilities of mixed-method approaches and why this strategy can yield fruitful research outcomes. Cultural policy research is then seen as an essential factor in ensuring that community music ‘reaches people’ and plays a key role in the inclusion agenda (Currie et al. 2020).

The act of facilitating music experiences is at the heart of the idea of intervention. Authors across this issue considered the ‘practice’ of community music within the conceptual lenses being discussed here. Anderson and Willingham (2020) suggested that three questions are essential for a music leader to answer to enable a move to action: Where am I? Who am I with? What am I good at? There is a resonance here with the idea that intervention is ‘centred around the person who intervenes’ (Ansdell et al. 2020) but we are asked to consider our own musical identities as our ‘dominance’ may reduce participants creative possibilities (Currie et al. 2020).

Underlying the work of all the authors was a commitment to the idea of lifelong musical learning. It was noted that principles of lifelong learning can open up spaces for various combinations of ages, cultural backgrounds and levels of ability (Anderson and Willingham 2020). When these environments are forthcoming there are enhanced capacities for enriching the lives

of individuals, as individuals, but also within community settings. There was a recognition that particular skills are required through which this work can be undertaken, participants need to be exposed to 'knowledgeable mentor-teacher-facilitators who embody deeply rooted and flexible musicianship, but in addition, have a wide range of instructional tools that maintain the process' (Anderson and Willingham 2020). Connected to the idea of skills required to carry out the work of the music facilitator, one group particularly critiqued the notion of the community musician's 'toolkit' stating that

Whilst tool selection is positive, in that it reiterates the need for responsiveness to context, the notion of toolkit itself may be problematic since it is suggestive of a 'fix it' approach that could perhaps embed community music activity in a deficit model.

(Currie et al. 2010)

As a collection, the four collaborative articles offer a rich tapestry of ideas and thoughts interwoven with personal recollections of projects and practices. There are many ways to engage in these dialogues and we recognize that we have selected a few of the themes that spoke to us and our agenda. On reflecting on the discussions, we have identified five key discourses running throughout the events: value, context, measurement, process/product and pedagogy. The following section presents the various lines we detected within these discourses.

DISCOURSES

1. Value

Questions of value started to emerge very early on in the discussions. In considering whether the terms excellence and inclusion should continue to frame the debate, a discussion thread related to who sets standards for excellence led to consideration of what and whose values are being projected when we talk about excellence and inclusion. Within this thread there are two distinct groups of responses related to 'self' and 'other'. On the one hand there was strong feeling that both excellence and inclusion are personally held values and are linked to our own self-efficacy. On the other hand, there was vibrant critique of the external bodies that are perceived to drive both excellence and inclusion. These external bodies include funders, formal musical institutions, examination providers and policy-makers, giving rise to questions related to power, as manifest in the articles within this special edition.

There were discussions related to self-awareness both in terms of being conscious of who we are (reflexivity) and calls for caution in not overstating the meaning and significance of our own work (reflectivity). Acknowledgement that power relations exist at both micro and macro levels in music practice led to consideration of decision making processes and how decisions are value judgements in themselves. Both excellent and inclusive practice was considered as happening when value judgements are passed over to the participants. However, the discussions acknowledge that it takes a great deal of self-awareness to enable the participants' voices to be fully heard whilst reducing the imposition of the music educators' own voice or their personal interpretation of the participants' voice. This was fuelled by discussions of music genres and the perceived value attributed to them.

With regard to excellence, participants were clear that values from one music genre could not be applied to another. There were however strongly argued views on whether any given specific music genres were inclusive or exclusive. This contradicted any sense that excellence and inclusion were universally understood concepts. Tensions arose when those working in one genre claimed that excellence values cannot be transferable whilst also claiming that their practice was universally inclusive. This tension was not specific to one genre, but emerged in relation to different genres at different points in the project. A counterpoint to this was the view that we must not base our work on the single value that music is universally good – perhaps music is not good for everyone and practitioners might respect the choice not to participate. These discussions were entwined with the other key discourses but most notably in relation to language and context; that language holds power and projects value, yet language is contextual.

2. Context

Context both shapes and challenges our values and as practitioners we might resist imposing our values and assume that we know what is best before entering, or during the process of working within, any context. A common definition of excellence offered revolved around personal achievement. Similarly, inclusion was often considered to be related to enabling the achievement of others. These were always enveloped in understandings that excellence means different things in different contexts. On the contrary, like the discussion of genre above in relation to value, there was disagreement as to whether inclusivity is contextual or universal. This led to consideration of community music as an intervention; as a way to either promote personal growth or take it away, thus sparking the provocation as to the nature of community music as intervention. There was a sense that practitioners need to know, understand and appreciate their context, but there was difficulty in reconciling the fact that to deliberately include often entails a level of exclusion. If the context demands a particular category of participant, this will naturally exclude others. By shifting the view of where inclusion and exclusion lie, practitioners are able to understand that their context might be exclusive, undermining their 'ideal' of inclusivity. The concept of excellence is then shifted to a focus on personal progression relative to the individual and context rather than as a value brought in by the practitioner. Ultimately, both excellence and inclusion are seen through each individual's lens and therefore will be assessed differently by different people, causing tensions with the concept of, and requirement for, measurement.

3. Measurement

Discussions of how we encounter excellence led to thinking related to how we 'know' what excellence is and therefore how we measure it. For some, the integrity of the practitioner was considered paramount, with the caveat that in order to maintain integrity the practitioner must be both reflexive and reflective. This was counter-balanced by questions as to whether an individual is the best judge of their own work; whether excellence is always self-determined. Discussions surrounding subjectivity and objectivity in measuring musical activity ran throughout the project and were shaped by questions that posed problems such as the benchmarks of professional standards, the notion of perfection and what being good means, and whether it is right to measure

3. Theory of Change is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context, <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>. Accessed 26 May 2020.

the quality of a musical situation based on the quality standards of a different context. Also linked to the value discourse, a recurrent theme prompted the questions, 'should measurement take place from within the context or as an outside objective and whether the reliability and validity of the tools of measurement will dictate what quality is?'

This presents a contradiction to notions of inclusion and inclusive pedagogy where value judgements are passed over to the participants. It was agreed that there is a fine line between the need for measurements to inform the practitioner of the effectiveness of their work and the desire for control through measurement of the effectiveness of the practitioner, with, for example, comparisons to formal music education regulatory controls. A common theme was the idea that measurement could be linked to engagement. It was pointed out that many businesses and charities write a 'theory of change'³ to articulate the process by which they intend to achieve their long-term aims. Within this, the context, assumptions and activities are all expressed within the change process, and anticipated outcomes and impacts are identified. The idea of exploring the change process rather than the impact (or the product) was posed as an alternative to attempting to measure impact thus juxtaposing discourse related to whether the balance of value should be placed on the process of the intervention or the product.

4. Process/Product

An interesting contradiction related to process and product provided a backdrop for discussions related to how excellence and inclusion are perceived in different contexts. It was posited that musicians strive to reach the highest level they can. The quality of the performance, or product, is paramount and this often requires studying at centres of excellence. Parents, practitioners and teachers often want those who are learning and developing to do so by working hard, taking a risk, making mistakes and learning as a result of this. Value is given to the process more than the product of learning. This led to the emergence of a discourse surrounding process and product. Descriptions of excellence included thinking around progress rather than achievement, embracing the interdependency of the tangible and visible and the intangible and hidden, entering a state of 'flow' and 'groove' towards full participation, transferral of power, engagement and high attendance.

Excellence was mostly linked to 'doing', and interventions were deemed not to be excellent when they were product driven rather than process driven. In tandem, descriptions of inclusion focused on enabling people to achieve excellence in the way described above. Inclusion was considered to involve provision of access, removal of barriers and a celebration of difference. Inclusion was attributed to changed structures that enable changing activities to take place. Closely aligned to the discussions surrounding value, debates of the place of music genre in descriptions of inclusion sparked energetic disagreement as to whether genres in themselves can ever be fully inclusive. Inclusion was mostly linked to 'being', with ideas emerging that to 'be' inclusive requires you to 'do' excellence work. The way participants reflected on how practitioners achieve this suggested the necessity to adopt an approach that enables inclusivity through excellence in pedagogical practice.

5. Pedagogy

A question that emerged frequently related to the sustainability of the impacts of intervention. It was pointed out that intervention may have negative outcomes as well as positive outcomes, and these should not be left undisclosed. As noted within the discourse surrounding measurement, evaluation becomes problematic when it is used to satisfy funders' requirements rather than inform practice. Moreover, if practitioners adopt product-driven pedagogy, what happens when the intervention ends? If the focus is on the product, then this will be difficult to sustain. If the focus is on the process, then this becomes more easily sustainable through transference to the others within the context, for example, a group can continue working in the same way after an intervention has ended. The importance of reflexivity and reflectivity is weaved throughout all the five key discourses, and it is these practitioner qualities that were deemed fundamental to effective practice that ensured sustainability. They enabled the practitioner to develop an understanding that there are multiple ways to learn, teach and lead, and the practitioner may not yet know the best way to work with every student or client. This aligns closely with the idea expressed earlier that practitioners should avoid entering a context thinking that they know what is best for the participants, and it was agreed by many that although intervention from the outside might be considered an interference, intervention from the inside might be considered as pedagogical practice; the practitioner enters a context and applies their pedagogical strategies to the unique context in order to intervene so as to foster development. These pedagogical strategies might involve intervening through questioning to help participants work through challenges. What is interesting in reflecting on the discourse surrounding pedagogy is that although there was a clear critique of pedagogy that is categorized as formal or instructional, inclusive pedagogy itself was not articulated; participants could articulate how they did not wish to work, but found it difficult to articulate how they do work without falling back on a discussion of genre-based activities (performance, composition, improvisation, etc.). This brings us back to the concept of intervention and what we value; should excellence entail valuing 'how' rather than 'what', and is inclusion a product of this value shift?

REDEFINING EXCELLENCE AND INCLUSION

Our reflections on the articles in this special issue and the key discourses emerging throughout the project have led us to the following findings. In exploring the concepts of excellence, inclusion and intervention, we identified three underlying issues that affect the way these concepts manifest and are used in different contexts.

1. Pedagogy

There is a misunderstanding of inclusive practice caused by focusing on the content of the practice (*what* music) rather than the form the practice takes (*how* the music is made). The music genre debate is clouding the issue of what inclusion is. Treating excellence as a product leads to pedagogies centred on instructional strategies. This is seen across the formal, non-formal and informal spectrum. Considering an intervention as non-formal is not enough to claim inclusivity. Analysing pedagogy rather than materials and content provides a better way to understand inclusion and excellence and challenge

4. An earlier iteration of these ideas can be found in the following text (Henley 2015).

notions that these two points are best in tension with each other or worst on opposite sides of the spectrum.

2. Power

The differences in the way interventions are used can be understood through analysing the power relations at play both within the intervention and between the intervention and its wider context. Recognizing that power exists in any relationship and is automatically part of facilitator/participant or teacher/student interactions is vital. To offer empowering opportunities requires an understanding that relationships are built on inequality and that means acknowledging the responsibilities inherent within such interactions.

3. Impact and measurement

The need to measure impact to evidence the inclusivity and excellence of funded projects is problematic. Identifying outcomes before the participants have been identified, then measuring the success of a project against those outcomes is contrary to inclusive pedagogical approaches.⁴ Often the most impactful outcomes are either unseen or unmeasurable in the regular sense of the word, and the culture of future funding being reliant on reporting positive findings clouds the reporting of negative outcomes. However, the measurement of impact is not necessarily the right thing to critique and measurement can only be fit for purpose if we know what we are measuring. This being the case a redefinition of the concepts of excellence and inclusion might be needed in order to ascertain what it is we want to know.

WHAT IF...

It is common to understand excellence and inclusion in the following way:

- Excellence as a product;
- Inclusion as a process.

The MUSOC project offered some challenges to these understandings. Our analysis of the articles in this issue and the conversations threaded throughout the two-year project suggests that conceiving inclusion as a process might be problematic. If intervention is understood as an active process, and there is a desire for excellence in intervention, then maybe excellence is better articulated as a process?

From the distillation of the key discourses above we have identified that the key ingredients often associated with excellence are better understood in terms of the engagement with the activity. This idea reinforces the premise that excellence might be a process rather than a product. This notion was considered when exploring the challenges inherent when introducing both teacher education and non-formal approaches to music teaching and learning into a music conservatoire, a model that has traditionally had its focus on performance.

Alongside this, the key discourses also suggest inclusion might be more closely related to the product of engagement rather than engagement in and of itself. We, therefore, ask: is inclusion the product of intervention rather than the process towards intervention? If we engage in a 'theory of change' approach to our work (a course of action whereby one articulates the process

through which to seek to address identified challenges), and those challenges are related to inclusion, the predetermined outcome, or the product of the theory of change, becomes inclusion. We think that as a result of this, music interventions can be better equipped at responding to issues relating to inclusion.

Moving towards a more inclusive society requires a process of change. The success of the change process is determined by how we enact that change. What if we flipped common-place interpretations of what excellence and inclusion are? The formation would read:

- Excellence is a process, leading to;
- Inclusion as the product.

How might these ideas be operationalized? How would this reversal manifest in community music practice? What influence would this exchange have within an application for funding? What is the implication for arts policy?

As the project draws to a close with this collection of articles we would like to thank all those who contributed to the discussion. As project leaders, we hope that our cliff-hanger of a 'conclusion' will ignite further explorations and put to the test some of the project findings, conclusions and statements.

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