Helping students discover their own creativity through performance
Elliot May

Set sail for the sun
Play a tone for so long
Until you hear its individual vibrations
Hold the tone
And listen to the tones of the others
- to all of them together, not to individual ones -
and slowly move your tone
until you arrive at complete harmony
and the whole sound turns to gold
to pure, gently shimmering fire.

Stockhausen.

I have always been fascinated by what makes a talented performer. The duality of profound confidence versus utter terror, though part of the human condition, is often highlighted in singers. It's a self-imposed dilemma.

As a singing teacher, I wanted to investigate whether – and how – I can give my students the 'tools' to use as a foundation for their individual musical expression and confidence. As Stewart Gordon says in his book *Mastering the Art of Performance*, 'performance becomes the goal that certifies you have mastered the skills that challenged you' (Gordon: 7).

An article by Malcolm Gladwell that I read in *The Weekend Guardian*, suggested that one could become an expert performer in anything with 10,000 hours of practice (roughly three hours a day for ten years). This intrigued me: can creativity be taught? Or do we just have to practice and create new neural pathways and habits? The article suggested that, 'The Psychologist K. Anders Ericsson stated that the thing that distinguishes one performer from the next is how hard he or she works ….a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise'

and went on to say, 'Neurologist, Daniel Levitin asserts "It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery".'

So is musical creativity genetic, innate, a gift, or could it simply be due to the amount and quality of experiences that the individual has had? Irene Delige and John Sloboda in their book *Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of Performance, Improvisation and Composition*, suggest one approach to answering the question:

> Where does an individual's musical ability originate? ... early musical ... creative exploration arises from observations of an infant's persistent motivation to reproduce sounds discovered by chance, and to repeat and modify their vocal products with overt signs of effort. (Deliege & Sloboda: 104)

My own development as a performer and singer has benefited hugely from 'creative exploration' in terms of improvisation since a very young child. This helped me train my ear enormously. I learnt to somewhat master my adrenalin by allowing the fear to convert to really 'letting go' and become part of the music ensemble, live on stage. Therefore this enabled my confidence and skill to continually grow, which in itself contributes to the symbiotic relationship between audience and performer.

I decided that I would like to offer and share with my students this aptitude, in a safe experiential learning environment.

My initial question of 'How can I enrich my students' experience of creativity and performance through my teaching?' led me to many others. What I wanted to test was the idea that if I could find ways to offer them more real, live performance time, they would be likely to take more responsibility for their learning and become enriched by the process.

But how could my ideas be implemented? How can you 'assess' creativity as it is so subjective? Would I hold unrecognized biases based on my own passion?

How might I create the conditions to help my students take more risks and get closer to their creative potential? What really was the best way to teach creativity and offer them a 'real world performance experience'?

A story of two jam sessions and a gig

In the end, it was the snow that got us going. It was winter and snow had forced the college to close on the day when the students were due to learn that week's song. So they arrived for their performance workshop completely unprepared. Rather than battle through the class blindly, as the week's genre was rap (and as

its roots lay in on-the-spot creativity from the streets) I got the house band to play a cycle of music and see if the students could create something. All but three, out of eighteen, actively took part and created an atmosphere of electricity and productivity. What was interesting however was that the strongest 'technical' students found this extremely challenging. It appeared that the students who were usually the most disruptive rose to the challenge, were the most creative, and for once were really involved in the class. The remaining students who also flourished were those who have good technique and considerable creative talent.

I thought about what had happened during this unexpected 'snow intervention'. Desiring the 'betterment of the community' my ideas developed into wanting to implement a degree of change into the curriculum. I wanted to introduce a creative session once a term during a performance workshop and set up one small acoustic gig outside of college at a local venue during the Summer term. This would enable those who wished to sing and perform their original work, if they so chose, in a 'real world' situation.

The second jam session was more structured and controlled. I got the students to direct the band and themselves, as a group and as individuals. We all stood in a circle and improvised to the reggae song *Get Up, Stand Up* by Bob Marley. Some students conducted the band in terms of getting certain instruments to drop in and out, creating a live arrangement. This allowed the rest to vocalize freely over sections, sometimes in groups and sometimes in solo. Once again all the students participated and rotated activities, with great focused energy, skill and joy.

The next intervention was the gig off campus. There was an audition and a 'role assignment' preproduction discussion for the show, which I left entirely up to the students, while I quietly observed. I found it very difficult to sit back and not prompt them, as I did not want them to fail by leaving anything out. I was reminded that participant observation was very difficult and my impartiality and my abilities to let student autonomy develop were sorely challenged!

The gig was held in a small local venue and was greatly attended by friends and families as well as the general public. It was a great success and was run, performed, organized, and stage and technically managed entirely by the students. I took notes and again found it very hard not to step in and intervene at the last minute. I also invited the Head of the Vocal Department, who was most impressed and supportive. The entire process was recorded in sound and vision (on a DVD) and in my notebook, and was discussed and dissected by the students later.

Person-centered learning theories

I found a number of well established learning theories that seemed to resonate with our experiences.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

I found David Kolb's idea of an experiential learning cycle an excellent tool. My interventions plus the subsequent discussions thereafter fitted neatly into Kolb's cycle of learning, doing, reflection and absorption. It also ensured that activities were varied and kept the students focused. As Geoff Petty reminds us in his book *Teaching Today*, 'experience does not guarantee learning'. (Petty: 287)

Kolb suggests that 'learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb: 38). Students need to constantly reflect on their learning experience and process, thereby linking thinking and doing. The discussions we had and the written feed-back that I set, helped the students comment on their own work and seemingly established deeper understanding in terms of concrete experience and abstract conceptualization.

As for my part as I too went round the Kolb cycle - indeed spiral! - and I began to tailor my facilitation accordingly. I noticed how I needed to constantly reflect and plan ahead, to keep enhancing my abilities in terms of letting them develop student autonomy and just observe. I was reminded of Stephen Nachmanovitch's advice on teaching improvisation:

> If you give them space, they will hear it and they will correct themselves. The less you say, the better. The whole art of teaching improvisation is to calibrate your responses in such a way as to be supportive and nurturing – to become the room in which this takes place.

In relation to the students' abilities I was reminded that they would all be at different levels of perception and skill in terms of their experience and that I needed to constantly pay attention to their individual needs as learners. It appears that Kolb's cycle perfectly encapsulated part of my question, which was, 'Can you develop creative performance and ability through experience and reflection?' Indeed, the answer is a resounding yes. In using this model I felt I maintained a positive impact on both myself and my students as it really reinforces self directed learning both for individuals and the whole group. This was exemplified by students' attitudes before, during and after the gig. They came together as a team and on the night itself were like a tight knit family caring about each other's performances and sensibilities. They all achieved a high level of responsibility and had overtly grown in confidence and

skill. In the discussion we had after watching the DVD we had made of the gig, it again became apparent how supportive they were of each other. As David Boud says in his book *Developing Students' Autonomy in Learning*, really effective learning can take place where students are 'pursuing their own learning needs within the context of the group, referring to others for support and feed back and for validation of the enterprise'. (Boud: 23)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

This lofty goal of self- actualization and fulfillment can be applied to us all and underpins all my teaching let alone my philosophy. It is especially important in terms of building the confidence needed to improvise and perform. The creative process I believe demands that an individual needs to be in a very secure place, in order to confidently experiment. As Maslow said, certain needs must be satisfied before the student can move up the pyramid and it was their safety, belongingness and esteem needs that drew out my tendency to 'mother' them and over-facilitate and rescue. This aspect of my teaching has to be constantly kept in check. I am aware of how fearful of criticism and failure my students are - as, indeed, all performers are. The constant need for reassurance was contributing in blocking them from achieving their higher goals. Therefore the impact on my teaching led me to make sure that I was nurturing and offering security and stability throughout the creative sessions. I found this at times very hard to keep in balance and became acutely aware of each individual's developmental and personal stage, as well my own. I tried my best to encourage and praise them according to their natures and remind them that comparisons and competitiveness can sometimes hinder the creative process.

John Heron's Six Categories of Group Intervention

This group intervention model gives us options and pointers towards appropriate ways of essentially supporting students' emotions. My strengths lie seemingly in the 'cathartic' area of the facilitative interventions as I am often able to help students release emotional blockages. I am also aware that some students do not wish to be exposed nor confide in me, and that should be respected too. On occasion I just listen and on others I choose dialogue, attempting to highlight the intrinsic value of each individual. In terms of the authoritative interventions, I knew I had to be careful not to invalidate or denigrate them in terms of the way they put together a melody or delivered a performance. If a student hit a blind spot and started slandering their own abilities, again I entered into a dialogue privately after class helping them to see what it was that was limiting their behavior and abilities. I did this on many occasions with almost all students in private tutorials, and relied upon Heron's comprehensive guidelines in order to continue to draw out their potential in terms of the task at hand.

This is just a snapshot of some of the theories that I brought into my teaching during this project, but it is certainly true to say that I have found researching and then trying out humanistic-inspired educational approaches to have had a powerful effect on my students' learning as well as on my own development as a teacher and facilitator.

Most teaching is concerned with imparting something. My question is concerned with drawing out the student's natural, if embryonic, abilities. The key in allowing this is to let them 'work empirically, and trusting that they will then learn, with some guidance, from the attempted playing experience' (Bailey: 121). I concur with this approach as 'this is not the milieu for corrective technical instruction, it is the experimental milieu' (Allen: 37). Indeed, Han Bennink (a Dutch drummer teacher at the Muziek School in Haarlem in Holland) puts it very well:

> We are teaching them to make music out of their own background, not someone else's background. Learning what you are. In my eyes, that's all you can do. Let people find out what they are and where they are and where their musical influences and preferences come from. Teach them to explore their own background.

How my students responded to the experience

While I was planning this project, I discussed the ideas with my students. I learned a very significant and surprising fact from them: the majority of my students had gone through the entire year without giving a single real live performance. Getting them to put on a local show on their own, organized by themselves and performing their own material, seemed more important than ever.

After the gig, I wanted to see if the students could descriptively tell me about their own developments as a result of their new experiences of jamming and gigging.

With regard to the creative jamming sessions, one student said *This made me realize why I came to college in the first place … it allowed us to be more creative and free to sing music that means something to us.* Comments like these were in abundance, each student stated they found it very fulfilling and they commented on how interesting it was to see a different side of their fellow students in terms of ability and musical expression. They also noted that because they knew there were not being assessed that week, they were much more confident and 'unfettered' during the process.

To gain further insights into how students had experienced the gig, and what they had got from it, I asked them each to write me a short paragraph of their reflections. The results were manifold but the theme was that they all benefited in confidence having performed in front of a real audience. Some mentioned how it helped them to deal with nerves and how to connect with an audience. The majority of students chose to perform their own material and expressed their delight in doing so and how it has inspired them to write more.

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After the gig, we watched the DVD of the night together in class. Some of the students had never seen themselves perform and it was a terrifying experience for most. They realized that only two of them said thank you to their audience after their performance. They noted that to really 'own' the stage and make an impact professionally they needed to confidently project themselves. Being filmed opened up a huge discussion too. It was so beneficial for them to draw these conclusions themselves, rather than being told. I asked them to comment on themselves and others and make any other observations and reflections that they had. They were very supportive of each other, however, true to human nature, they were hard on themselves. I got them to then write down their comments, and the upshot of that was they could perceive areas of where improvement was needed. It appeared that the DVD made a great impact and was a very important and deep learning process.

There was one student who suffered after seeing herself on screen. She felt she had no particular attributes to her performance, no particular angle. Again, I set up a one-to-one session and helped her to see what she did in fact have and what she could develop. Her fellow classmates, incidentally, gave her a lot of warm encouragement and disagreed with her view of herself. The whole process though seemingly negative turned out to be a very valuable learning curve for her, by her own admission, as she clearly identified for herself areas of improvement.

Conclusions and reflections

So, did I manage to enrich the students' experiences of creativity and performance? I believe so. The students developed and took more responsibility, and deepened their confidence both in improvisational skills and performance. The chain of events has impacted deeply on their learning as well as providing great memories. It is paramount, however, that we offer the students realistic goals. The ethics of hard work, commitment and professionalism are essential, but to inspire them to seek out their own musical expression is of equal importance, as it develops one into a well rounded musician. All this contributes to confidence, which is paramount in this highly competitive world. In my opinion, giving them any less would be failing them. It appears that the work of others has confirmed my ideas and I shall continue to read on this subject.

There are many ways of teaching creativity and performance and as long as one stays true to ones self you can reveal your potential. I impart this to my students all the time... work with what you've got and who you are! Take the examples of Beyonce and Kylie Minogue - both incredibly famous and popular yet the later has seemingly less obvious skill and talent, but through hard work and playing to her strengths she is successful.

It appears that, yes, 'star quality' is innate, yet talent comes in degrees and can be built on through practice, hard work and dedication. Experience and reflection build confidence,

therefore surely it is our uniqueness that needs to be revealed and developed and I believe as a tutor it is part of my role to do so.

I intend to continue to help those 'technicians' in the class seemingly only to be able to reproduce others' work - and maybe it's because they practice so hard, it becomes so ingrained, that they then have difficulty improvising. Moreover is it that the more creative students find it hard to 'nail' the detail of others' work because they are less skilled, or because they haven't practiced enough, or their brain functions slightly differently?

For my own part, the most pressing personal challenge was for me to remain an observer and not over-facilitate the group - though 'if you've never made a mistake you've never made a discovery'!

I end with the wisdom of the Buddhist philosopher and educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi, who writes, 'A teacher needs the sensitivity of a midwife to aid in the self actualizing process without trying to control it, to be ready standing by, but not standing in the way' (Hope: 33).

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Elliot May is a teacher, singer and performer. She is based in Sussex.