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‘A planet where the muses work together’: Opera training as a vehicle for interdisciplinary engagement in higher education

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Abstract

This study is positioned within the context of the current recommendations for increased interdisciplinary and collaborative engagement in curriculum development (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.35). Supported also by recommendations for professional arts practitioners to be multi-skilled, circulated in such publications as the European Association of Conservatoires reports (AEC, 2003), Trinity Guildhall's *The Reflective Conservatoire* (Odam & Bannan, 2005) and *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education* (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013), this study is proposing that there are significant educational benefits from the implementation of and participation in opera-based activities. These possible benefits are discussed along with an overview of the range of skills and requirements which a career in opera is likely to demand. The paper includes as case-history a recent example of this collaborative approach - *The Paris Collection*, a large-scale opera project which was performed in January 2014 at the National Concert Hall in Dublin by students from Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama and designed by students from Dublin College of Creative Arts. The production was named thus because the two operas featured, Lehar's *The Merry Widow* and Puccini's *La Bohème* are both set in Paris.

The project was implemented through the undergraduate and postgraduate modular frameworks in each college and involved the engagement of over 160 students. The production, which was positively received and subsequently won the Institute for Designers

in Ireland Highly Commended Award in the Education category, was deemed to be a success; an appraisal which was expressed not only in the positive response to the performance, but also through feed-back and evaluation from staff and students in various formal and informal de-briefing sessions. However, in the process of preparation and rehearsal, the enterprise also presented significant challenges and issues. Although the remit of the project included the implementation of a professional environment, compromises had to be made in several instances, in order to enable it to proceed. These compromises gave rise to several broader questions relating to collaborative enterprises and the implementation of authentic professional demands within an educational framework.

The paper concludes with a discussion of opera-training as a productive vehicle for interdisciplinary study. With reference to *The Paris Collection* as case-history, the educational relevance of the project is evaluated with an identification and analysis of the benefits and challenges which arose during that process. Recommendations may assist the sustainable facilitation of other future enterprises which can be devised to truly reflect professional practice, demands and criteria. They make particular reference to establishing collaborative projects within academic programmes where they can form an intrinsic modular role in the curriculum.

Keywords: Opera, Design, Interdisciplinary, Higher Education, Conservatoire, Programme Development

Introduction

This study investigates the educational benefits derived from operatic training, taking as case-study, *The Paris Collection*, a DIT opera project which was created and presented by music and design undergraduate and postgraduate students in January 2014 at the National Concert Hall in Dublin.

"It is possible to learn more of the world by producing a single opera, or even conducting a single rehearsal, than by ten years reading in the Library of the British Museum" (Shaw, 1898). Bernard Shaw, as music critic, dramatist, co-founder of the London School of Economics and political commentator, is perhaps one of the most qualified figures to comment on interdisciplinary study. While his provocative statement could be open to debate, it does reflect the fact that opera embraces a comprehensive range of subject matter. Described by director and designer Franco Zeffirelli as *"a planet where the muses work together"* (Paull, 1990, p.129), the synergic nature of opera provides an abundant range of material which could be pertinent to the recommendations for curriculum development in higher education today.

In an introduction to the publication celebrating the 50th anniversary of the *Association of European Conservatoires*, Ian Horsburgh (president) emphasised the significant changes taking place:

"The pull between the traditions of music education and the influences of contemporary life have probably never been as extreme as they are now. The role of the conservatoires, and all those who serve in them, have to contend with significant and demanding issues." (Horsburgh, 2003, p.6)

Even twelve years later, this statement still resonates. The ongoing challenges in the creative professions mean that artists must be highly proficient in their specialist study whilst also possessing a range of skills and resources necessary for a portfolio career. This point of view

was reflected in a section about future graduates in Ireland in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 chaired by Colin Hunt:

“To address the societal needs over the coming years, increased attention must be paid to core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, team-working skills and the effective use of information technology. The emphasis has switched from over-specialisation towards deeper and broader disciplinary foundations, with learning objectives that explicitly seek to nurture in students the creativity, enthusiasm and skills required for continual engagement with learning. In this context, the arts, humanities and social sciences have a key role to play.”
(Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 35)

Opera in Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Contexts

Opera-training can play a part in these 'key roles' and contribute to engendering graduate attributes, similar to those referenced above. Following recent interviews with a broad profile of international directors, performers, conductors and teachers about what qualities and attributes are necessary for performers entering the current opera profession (Hamilton, 2014), the findings unanimously revealed that performers today must possess versatility, creativity, receptivity and individuality: *“The ability to be creative and run with an idea, plus a large degree of fearlessness”* (Participant 7, November, 2014).

Opera singers need to be adept as actors, dancers and even occasionally as acrobats. They need to be musically accomplished, possess vocal expertise, physical expressivity, convincing fluency in languages, and the ability to deliver spoken text. In many instances, they need to use these skills simultaneously. These attributes are relevant to performers. However, as opera embraces a range of disciplines, it is therefore an appropriate vehicle for cross-disciplinary study, an assertion supported by Julie Buckler, Harvard Professor of Slavic languages:

“Multidisciplinary work draws upon knowledge from more than one discipline, but preserves the disciplinary identities of these multiple

disciplinary elements. Certain objects of study - opera and the city, to give two of my favorite examples - seem naturally suited to multidisciplinary investigation." (Buckler, 2004, p. 2)

Involvement in an opera project can facilitate for most participants the exploration of a broad range of academic study. As the synergy embraces music, literature, drama and the visual arts, this range can include musicology, history, aesthetics, authentic performance practice, linguistics, style and interpretation. While it is particularly relevant to aspiring professional singers, *répétiteurs*, conductors and orchestral players, its function can be much wider than that.

For example, any director, designer or stage manager needs to have an understanding of music, technology and event management skills in order to be able to conceptualise or facilitate the running of an opera production. In order to wear or design a period costume with authenticity and style, performers, costume designers and wardrobe personnel should have an awareness of the socio/historical circumstances prevalent when that particular fashion came about. In order to be able to design a stage set, a designer should not only have an understanding of the original cultural and aesthetic context of the narrative, but should also have practical awareness of the logistics of getting numbers of performers on and off stage in time to be ready to pick up a musical cue, or indeed to be able to see the conductor when they arrive there. These are but a few examples which illustrate the cross-disciplinary potential of this subject.

Multidisciplinary Opera Studies in the Conservatoire Environment

From the 1950s, there was a comprehensive opera-training course which embraced multidisciplinary study within the Royal Manchester College of Music and latterly the amalgamated Royal Northern College of Music. (Kennedy, 1971, p.194). Drama teacher

Elaine Bevis, who taught there for over thirty years, feels that equally relevant is the fact that a multidisciplinary approach can engender and facilitate transferable skills: “To me it seems so intrinsic to anything - and not just in the Arts ... The inter-related disciplines seem to help to build a rounder and fuller personal development and make for greater adaptability in assorted environments” (E. Bevis, personal communication, 14 March, 2015).

Bevis believes the interdisciplinary approach also informed career choices for those who did not continue as performers. Alumni from the RMCM and RNCM have included therapists in speech, language and literacy, musicologists specialising in performance research, film producers, project managers, broadcasters, opera directors and artistic managers (personal communication, 14 March, 2015).

A brief scan of the web-sites of major international conservatoires would reveal that vocal departments strongly promote their opera programmes. An image of an opera production, which might represent a range of activities including singing, acting, orchestral and keyboard playing, costume and set design, can be a compelling promotional tool. However, Molière's comment that 'of all the noises known to man, opera is the most expensive' (Molière, n.d.) still rings true today and it would be surmised that conservatoires are prepared to make the considerable investment in operatic training and events, because there are significant educational benefits from doing so.

The case-history, *The Paris Collection*, is an example of that form of educational investment. While it was deemed to have been a highly successful venture, the challenges it presented were significant and gave rise to a wariness among staff to launch into a similar exercise the following year.

Research Question

The research question addressed in this study is; with reference to collaborative opera projects, how can the implementation of such interdisciplinary enterprises perform a relevant and sustained role within an academic structure and environment where they can authentically reflect the practices, demands and criteria of the corresponding professional environment?

Literature Review

In support of this discussion, it has been important to glean an overview of current perceptions of multidisciplinary study in conservatoire education. Several articles in *The Reflective Conservatoire* (Ed. Odam & Bannan, 2005) are pertinent to this:

“The role of a conservatoire should be re-aligned to meet the needs, expectations and potential of today's society. Reformulating the idea of what a musician could be - what he or she has beyond a technical proficiency in one instrument - is highly relevant to the work-place, as musicians now need many strings to their bow.” (Gregory, 2005, p. 298)

Such educational literature consistently identifies the collaborative dynamic as an imperative. *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education* (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013) therefore provided relevant reading: The opening statement of singing teacher Armin Zanner's article on collaborative vocal tuition, "Vocal music is on almost every level a collaborative art" (Zanner, 2013, p.231) encapsulates the concept. Gregory supports this: "Important qualities for those who want to remain employable are to be creative, multifaceted when performing, and effective in collaborative environments" (Gregory, 2005, p. 298).

As creativity consistently emerges as a theme in much of the educational literature, it has been interesting in *Developing Creativities in Higher Music Education* (Ed. Bernard, 2014)

to read of practitioners' reflections and evaluations of pedagogical studies and projects. In that publication, Houmann & Saether articulate a provocative description of the dilemma which creativity presents in more orthodox academic circles: “*As shown in the study, creativity is a wildcard in academia. Creativity is thought of as something which is linked to success, but academic success is not seen as being linked to creativity*” (Houmann & Saether, 2014, p.183).

In *Negotiating with tradition: Curriculum reform and institutional transition in a conservatoire*, (Duffy, 2013), Celia Duffy's paper describing the process of curricular review at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland has been illuminating:

“We wanted to explore with our students and each other the opportunities that the different traditions and practices, methods and outlooks of our range of disciplines could offer, and then to look beyond them. As our manifesto put it, there needed to be ‘collision, challenge and ultimately collaboration’ – and transformation. We wanted to produce the thinking artist, able to deal with artistic and intellectual challenges.”
(Duffy, 2013, p.5)

While pedagogical literature focuses on many forms of collaborative approaches, there appears to be less material about opera studies. Therefore, it has been very helpful to obtain insights and information about a conservatoire with a long and documented history in this field. In Michael Kennedy's book *The History of the Royal Manchester College of Music 1893 – 1972*, Kennedy references a highly impressive alumni list of those who studied there and has asserted that Frederic Cox, (Principal, 1959 - 1970) brought “*international attention and admiration*” to the RMCM through a regime of opera training and events. (Kennedy, 1971, p.194). This assertion was supported by Bevis who believes that Cox was one of the first figures in European higher music education to implement and oversee this holistic approach: “*He was certainly far seeing and innovative. No such opera training in*

performance skills had previously been given to students anywhere.... His initial opera classes with Sheila Barlow were real pioneering stuff" (Bevis, 2010, p.4).

While pedagogical literature about opera training is relatively scarce, there is much more material about opera in general. I have found *The Cambridge Companion to Opera* (Ed. Till, 2012) to be particularly instructive as it provides many detailed articles exploring the multi-faceted nature of the art form. For example, former Director of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, Nicholas Payne's article about the business evolving within more inventive and flexible structures is congruent with the themes of commentary in pedagogical articles referenced earlier:

"Smaller outfits – seasonal festivals, light-footed touring companies without the burden of the upkeep of a building, groups dedicated to new work or finding new audiences – which thrive on a less elaborate administrative structure...The phenomenon belongs to the twenty-first century, the Internet age, which prizes flexibility and multiple choices. Could such small businesses be a model for the future?"
(Payne, 2012, p.68)

As opera provides a range of career opportunities including stage management, event management, lighting design and technology, set construction, prop making, costume design, film and promotion; articles relating to production technology and design in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera* (Ed. Till, 2012) have been informative. In one such article, Simon Williams asserts the importance of the visual impact in productions:

"Peter Brook ... has remarked that the greatest theatre stays in the memory less as coherent action, more as a series of striking images which are emblazoned on our memory. Theatre is as much a visual as an aural medium, and operatic productions that speak to us most directly are those that respond most imaginatively to the score and articulate effectively the central theme of the action." (Williams, 2012, p.154)

For those interested in a career in scenography, it's interesting to note from the Society of British Designers web-site, that the possible pathways into training include other disciplines: “Some people choose to enter the profession via post-graduate training or an MA having completed a degree in a related subject such as Fine Art or Drama or other spatial disciplines such as architecture” (Society of British Designers, 2015).

Payne's comment about "*light-footed touring companies*" being a possible "*model for the future*" (Payne, 2012, p.68) implies that contemporary student designers also need to train to be multi-skilled and adaptable; a concept which speaks to the criteria and conditions which both design and music students had to respond to in *The Paris Collection* collaboration.

However, in light of the congruencies between current higher educational recommendations and the multidisciplinary attributes of opera, it is surprising that there is not more literature about opera-training in education. There would appear to be an information gap in this field.

Research Design

With reference to *The Paris Collection* project, opera training was evaluated as a relevant form of interdisciplinary study using a qualitative methodology. The evaluation was made through data collated from the following sources:

- Informal feed-back and debriefing sessions with student participants
- Standard student evaluation mechanism; module feedback forms
- Discussion in formal scheduled de-briefing sessions with staff stake-holders
- Personal informal observation and reflection during the process of the project

- Supporting informal observation and reflection from Barry Sheehan, Design team leader

The three most challenging areas which arose during this collaboration are critically analysed and discussed, as these are pertinent to the over-arching question about how to effectively mesh the demands of such large-scale projects within an academic structure and environment where they are aligned to professional practice and can be sustained as part of the collegiate culture. With reference to future projects and collaborations, it is suggested how one might approach and resolve the issues arising from *The Paris Collection* experience.

Case-Study: The Paris Collection Project

Between September 2013 and January 2014, a large cohort of staff and students from the Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama and the Dublin College of Creative Arts collaborated on the creation of an opera production which was presented at the National Concert Hall on January 23rd. The production was called '*The Paris Collection*' and was named thus because the two operas featured; Lehar's *The Merry Widow* and Puccini's *La Bohème* are both set in Paris. The production which raised 6,303 euros in ticket sales, came in on budget and was very enthusiastically received by the public. It was short-listed for an award in the Education category for *The Institute of Designers in Ireland* and subsequently received a Highly Commended designation.

Academic Context

The project was implemented within the modular framework of the Masters in Music, Bachelor of Music, Bachelor of Arts in Visual Merchandising & Display, BA in Interior Design & Furniture, and BA in Visual Communications. The Ensemble modules in the MMus and BMus programmes however provide only basic accommodation for a project of

this size in terms of teaching hours and assessment criteria. The design modules afford more flexibility.

Personnel

Over 160 students engaged in the project: Of this number, approximately 70 were participating singers and instrumentalists, approximately ten were students from the Vanity X Make-up Academy and the remainder was design students. In order to reflect the competitive elements inherent within the arts industry, the set of conditions demanded that teams of design students had to prepare and present a pitch for their concept to be selected. This meant that substantial numbers of design students were able to utilise the project as subject matter for study. Of those who were not selected, many continued to support their colleagues in the preparation and building of the set. The singers also had to audition for their roles. As both pieces include chorus, it was possible to involve all the auditionees in either solo or ensemble capacity. The production was conducted by Trinity College Dublin under-graduate Killian Farrell. Vocal staff member Jennifer Hamilton directed the production and under the co-ordination of Barry Sheehan Assistant Head of the DIT Dublin College of Creative Arts, the set, costume concept and promotional material were designed by teams of students from that college. As the performance took place in a major public venue, participants were required, in tandem with supervision from teaching staff, to engage with a range of external professional personnel. An independent beauty school also worked on hair and make-up design with the singers.

Practicalities

While the design students took responsibility for the set construction, the entire company had to respond to the logistical and artistic challenges of taking the production into a major venue

on the day of performance with approximately three and a half hours of get-in, fit-up and rehearsal time before the show began at 7.30pm. The set therefore needed to be easily transportable and adaptable enough to embrace the two separate operas presented. The Merry Widow is set in a Parisian embassy and La Bohème in the backstreets of the Latin Quarter.

Findings and Discussion

Strengths and Benefits

It is easier to identify the more immediate effects following such an experience. From my own observations of working with the vocal students in subsequent performance projects, I found many of them to be more responsive in rehearsal and quicker to process artistic direction. The sixteen *Paris Collection* students who subsequently auditioned and participated in the professional production of Wide Open Opera's *Nixon in China* performed with authority and presence. Sheehan, who had masterminded and coordinated the production design has been very positive about the impact of the enterprise:

“The project was great for our students. This interdisciplinary team building was very beneficial. Being able to join other students with totally different skills from another School created something memorable and gave our students more confidence. This was the first time that they had worked on a real project. Being a performance, it had to be right first time and although this was a challenge, it added focus to their work.”

(B. Sheehan, personal communication, May 14, 2015)

The Quality Assurance module evaluations, administered through standard anonymity procedures, indicated very positive feedback about the weekly three hour Opera Ensemble Class, in which such productions are rehearsed. Informal de-briefing sessions and additional written feedback indicated that most vocal students felt that following the activities in the class that year, they had a greater understanding of the demands of the operatic profession and that they had increased confidence in their abilities in this sphere. Feedback also revealed

that several younger students wanted increased solo opportunities in future projects, rather than ensemble involvement. In formal de-briefing sessions with members of staff, the project was perceived to have been of significant value and success.

While this is encouraging, it is not immediately possible to quantify or evaluate the longer term effects derived from participation in such large-scale collaborations, as Bevis was able to do over a sustained period of time at the RCM and RNCM. (E. Bevis, personal communication, 14 March, 2015). With reference to current recommendations (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p.35), it is to be hoped that multidisciplinary engagement might inculcate attributes relevant on a deeper and broader scale. The subject of transferrable skills might provide material for a future study.

Disincentives

Articles and reports about interdisciplinary and collaborative engagement tend to focus on the benefits of the ethos. While Duffy's reference to "collision" (Duffy, 2013, p.5) is perhaps an indication that implementing an interdisciplinary approach can prove challenging, most literature does not dwell on the labour pains which can precede these innovative projects and activities. The hurdles encountered in this case-history however inform the research question; with reference to sustaining the implementation of collaborative enterprises which reflect authentic professional practice, within the academic environment.

Those members of staff with major responsibilities in *The Paris Collection*, found it to be in the final analysis, gratifying, interesting, exciting and profoundly stressful. While all agreed that it was a very good thing to do, and that it should be repeated in some form in the future, it is significant that the same staff members did not rush to repeat the endeavour the

following year. There are reasons for this, and these factors may prove insightful for others wishing to embark on interdisciplinary enterprises.

Challenges

One dilemma for teachers and facilitators is to what extent rigorous professional demands can be fully embedded within such projects, or to what extent should it be acknowledged that the venture is an educational exercise and may well be subject to compromises. Various situations occurred during our project which in a real professional situation would probably not arise.

Unrealistic Autonomy

With the final presentation of the promotional graphic design material we encountered a dilemma between educational and professional remits and consequently faced a potential *impasse* with the students concerned. Each team made a concept pitch and we were impressed with one particular team whose design was inspired by French 'New Wave' architecture of the 1960s. The staff panel felt that their stage design was elegant, adaptable and looked logistically as if it could be re-fitted in the venue in a short space of time, which was a critical part of the remit; a challenge aligned with current professional trends referenced by Payne: "*light-footed touring companies without the burden of the upkeep of a building*" (Payne, 2012, p.68). We, the panel were equally pleased with the team's graphic design and although, due to other academic demands, the text work had not been completed, we signed off on the entire package.

However, when the team came back with the completed posters, colleagues from the conservatory were unhappy with the choice of font for the publicity because they felt that the

information was too difficult to read. The design students had a very interesting argument to justify their choice. They felt that the cutting-edge quality of the graphics would attract a younger demographic who might be curious to investigate what the publicity was for.

On the other side of the debate, it was felt that the text was too obscure and would deter the older generation who constitute a significant audience demographic for these types of DIT events. The students were reluctant to compromise their artistic vision. These were all valid points of view. In the event, we reached a solution and avoided confrontation. This involved printing and displaying the largest posters just as the students had originally designed them while circulating additional publicity with clearer graphics through the conservatory web-site.

While also wanting to attract new audiences, the conservatory, who in this scenario was the client, could not risk losing the loyalty of its current supporters, for both financial and promotional reasons. Most of the staff assumed that this was understood. However, in the light of this debate, we acknowledged that we should not make assumptions about what is already known or understood. These were not Business Studies or Marketing students, but fledgling designers, and this part of their learning curve informed our own discoveries.

Availability and Commitment

The rehearsal schedules were often, by necessity, devised around the singers' lists of Non Availabilities. There were many more of these than would normally be permitted in a professional opera company, and this put final rehearsals under increased pressure. However, students needed to be able to undertake evening work and to prepare for and attend exams. Although the project was scheduled at an optimum time in the academic year, the realities of the curriculum and domestic finances prevailed. Consequently, many scenes, the

choreographed sequences particularly, had to be rehearsed towards the very end of the project, leaving much to chance. While this can happen in a professional situation, such scheduling would not be considered ideal practice.

Engagement and Retention

During the course of the project, four performers dropped out of the ensemble because they became anxious that they would not have enough time and energy for their other studies. Although the rehearsal schedule was significantly shorter than might be provided for a professional chorus, a few singers felt that participation as an ensemble member, rather than as a soloist, did not merit the full time commitment, and they consequently did not attend all the scheduled rehearsals.

Equally, in the design department, the textile students, having made a concept pitch to design and produce the costumes, decided with great regret, that they would not be able to follow through with the project because it was not possible for them to gain credits for any further work. They therefore had to concentrate on the completion of their other course-work. In the profession, the loss of the costume department would be profoundly consequential, and in our situation, was also not without its challenges. In the event, the costumes were sourced and produced by the stage director, the assistant director and the wardrobe coordinator; thus illustrating another example of multidisciplinary tasking.

How can such setbacks be avoided? These ventures can ill afford to support any student disengagement and the consequences of a project coming adrift become even more serious when it is planned to take place within the public domain.

Although the project was implemented within modular frame-works, enabling the students to receive basic credits for their work, we discovered that in order to do the project properly, more energy and time needed to be expended than appeared in the module descriptors. While staff and students were prepared to give extra hours to it, this created an unstable situation. Students cannot be pressurised to work extra voluntary hours and ultimately, they are likely to prioritise their time towards those modules which carry the most credits. Does this imply that we should not embark on such ventures?

Conclusion

Managing Autonomy

The fact that the graphic design team were unprepared to compromise their artistic vision is a controversial one. It could be argued that the reasoning behind their stance ought to be respected, as their justification was based on an understanding that opera needs to reach out to new audience demographics. In this, they were not wrong. In *The Cambridge Companion to Opera*, (Ed. Till, 2012) Payne refers to the future potential of "groups dedicated to new work or finding new audiences" and Till also discusses audience-seeking promotions: "... *the use of mobile media to organize spontaneous 'pop-up' or 'flashmob' operatic events, suggest that new technologies can also offer opportunities for more sociable, less isolating forms of engagement*" (Till, 2012, p.89).

It could equally be argued that the design team was misguided in their problem-solving. Instead of generating more accessibility, they risked the reduction of it. While we arrived at a short term solution to our dilemma over the artistic dispute with the design students, the bigger question still remains over conferring a level of autonomy which is perhaps professionally unrealistic.

Perhaps it should it have been equally relevant for those students to learn the realities of professional life where he or she who pays the piper, calls the tune? Conversely, we are encouraged to support the belief that it is vital that students today develop a sense of their own autonomy or agency, as Ian Shirley asserts (Ed. Burnard, 2009):

“Agency is about providing and managing autonomy. Like pocket money, agency allows for real decision making, within controlled parameters. Some decisions will prove wise, others foolish ... Autonomous activity can ... Develop a spirit of perseverance, where challenges and disappointments can promote creative invention and resilience.”
(Shirley 2009, p.51)

Oscar Odena comments further on Shirley's idea (Ed. Burnard, 2009) and proposes that agency requires *“A careful mix of autonomy and support, opportunity and challenge, knowledge and empowerment, and flexibility within clear objectives”* (Odena, 2014, p.130).

With hindsight, I would advise that objectives should be discussed and negotiated in great contractual detail between staff and students and that these details should penetrate further than the immediate goal of project delivery. I would also take profound heed of Odena's comments about 'controlled parameters'.

Facilitating Availability - Sustaining Commitment and Engagement

With reference to questions around vying academic commitments which impede sustained engagement in these projects, one solution would be to ensure that such collaborations are comprehensively implemented within the academic programme as substantially credited modules where they can be adequately resourced in terms of allocation of time and credits. In *The Reflective Conservatoire*, Gregory refers to the value of collaborations being *“more than just a series of paste-overs and add-ons”* but also that the *“greyness of collaboration lies in vague 'cross-overs' and a compromise of quality”* (Gregory, 2005, p.299, p.23).

Such transience or superficiality would be less probable if collaborative performance modules encompass academic as well as practical subject matter, with for example, the inclusion of supporting portfolios. This could mean that the creative nature of performance maybe seen as less of a "wildcard in academia" (Houmann & Saether, 2014, p.183). Students therefore might be less likely to be confronted with the dilemma of finding that so much other course-work is competing for their commitment, while they are immersed in non-credited projects.

Creating Academic Opportunities

Portfolios could for example include relevant musicological assignments, character or plot analyses supported by pertinent literary and artistic sources, reflections on performance practice or subject-related research in other artistic disciplines. As Duffy has articulated in her description of curriculum review in the NCS, it is possible to create and develop collaborative performance modules: *"We started this session with a three-day Learning and Teaching Conference. We did another Open Space, this time on how we could extend and drive further our suite of collaborative choice modules"* (Duffy, 2013, p.5). In *Collaborative Learning in Higher Education*, (Eds. Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013) in an article about student disengagement issues in the Scottish Music undergraduate programme at the RCS, she also explains how professional conduct and engagement can be incorporated into module content: *"Professional Practice is developed over four distinct, multi-stranded modules over the course of a Scottish Music student's career"* (Duffy, 2013, p.205).

At present in the DIT Conservatory, as the Bachelor of Music programme is reviewed, options and electives which might include involvement in interdisciplinary projects are being discussed. My recommendation in this area is to ensure that collaborations can be fully

supported within undergraduate and postgraduate academic programmes. It is also likely that more numbers of staff would be prepared to participate in these events if their time and commitment could be reflected more realistically within their allocated teaching hours. It is surmised that large-scale collaborative projects will usually require extra allocation of staff time. However, there is a better chance of embedding these enterprises within a collegiate culture if their execution does not depend exclusively on staff good will.

Recommendations

The recommendations from the study are summarised as follows:

- When formulating the criteria and objectives, take extra time to consider the issues which may seem obvious to staff, but may not be so obvious to students. Ensure that all participating schools are on the same wave-length. Endeavour to align criteria and objectives with current professional practice whenever possible.
- If it is unreasonably risky to rely entirely on a system of autonomous decision making from the student participants, establish flexible parameters before-hand. It could be useful at the onset to cite professional practice as an ongoing point of criteria, in the event of any divergence of opinion which may hinder the project's success.
- Create workable and flexible contingencies, particularly with reference to personnel. Nominate alternative personnel (understudies, deputies, substitutes).
- Establish collaborative projects robustly within the academic programme whereby regular implementation can be sustained and developed. Ensure that students can be awarded sufficient credits commensurate with their input of time and engagement. This final recommendation is supported by Odena (Ed. Burnard, 2014):

“Value collaboration in the students’ projects. In business and in science people work in teams, yet individualised assessment in higher education may limit the opportunities for collaborative work. Practitioner educators need to be creative in their own teaching and assessment strategies, for example by allowing joint submission of projects.” (Odena, 2014, p.134)

Arguably, the key word here is value. We know that collaborative experiences provide individuals with the opportunities to develop confidence, communication and inter-personal skills, acquire deeper understanding of a range of related academic disciplines and investigate a range of practical skills. Ultimately, if we hold that to be true, then it is recommended that value must be given to such projects by establishing them robustly and comprehensively in academic programmes, possibly as cross-curricular modules where realistic amounts of time and energy can be committed to them.

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