
Scene and Heard: Exploring a Jazz Ensemble as a Community of Musical Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores a jazz ensemble as it formed a “community of musical practice” (CoMP). Underpinned by a constructionist worldview, the study focused on the concept of “situated learning” within an adult jazz music ensemble based in Ireland. In this way, individual and collective meaning making, experiences, learning processes, interactions, relationships, and development of “practices” within the jazz ensemble were examined in context. Through a qualitative case study approach, data from observations, video recordings, interviews and participant logs were gathered over nine-months. As the study centred on examining the complexities of social processes of learning through music, this extensive varied data collection ensured an in-depth investigation of the jazz ensemble “on the ground.” The “community of practice” (CoP) theoretical framework in particular underpinned the research in order to shape the interpretation and analysis of the data findings. Employing the conceptual tools within the CoP model, the study findings illuminated and attempted to explain the jazz ensemble practices, nature of musical engagement, varying types of membership, negotiation of shared goals and types of learning tools as experienced within this music community. Such insights highlight the importance of group music making opportunities where participation, shared learning, identity formation, diversity and sustained relationships are paramount.

Keywords:

Communities of practice, music making, practice, ensemble, participation

Introduction

Communities with their distinctive norms, rules, structures, interactions and essentially “practices,” come together everyday to make music. Such communities have the potential to form and sustain “communities of musical practice” (CoMP). Through an examination of an Irish jazz ensemble this study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of one such CoMP through a qualitative case study approach. Thus, this exploration aims to lead to further understandings of the links between individuals and communities as it is mediated through music making.

Theoretical Position

The case study is positioned within a socio-cultural framework that draws heavily upon the writings of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977; 1984; 1990, 2002; 1993), de Certeau (1984) and Becker (2008). The “practices” the jazz ensemble were seen to occur within “places” or “fields” to create musical “spaces” or “worlds.” Investigating these “fields” through musical practice and how the “agents” constructed meaning collaboratively to acquire “habitus” was of interest here.

In examining the jazz ensemble as a CoMP, the *modus operandi*, akin to terms such as “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1977) “operational schema” (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 29-30) and “conventions” (Becker, 2008, p. 39), was crucially important to gain insight into this “musical world” (Finnegan, 2007; Mans, 2009). Within a community of practice (CoP) framework then, the “habitus” of the jazz ensemble was considered to reveal “ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short practices...in the course of this mutual behaviour”(Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1995, p. 464). Musical learning then within a CoMP is built on the foundation that leaning is “situated” (Koopman, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Taking this stance, the context of the local jazz ensemble was highly relevant to this study to explore the relationship between music, “place” and “community.”

Some previous music education and community music studies that have employed the CoP framework (Barrett, 2003, 2005; Blair, 2008; Campbell, 2002; Countryman, 2009; Harwood, 1998; Marsh, 1995; Waldron, 2009), have found it a useful means to “make sense” of music community practices. Within the CoP model understandings surrounding: collaborative learning, negotiated goals, shared repertoire, mutual knowledge building, and social interaction were investigated. Furthermore, this socio-cultural lens provided a means of examining shared expertise, membership, participation and roles that spanned from “legitimate peripheral participation” to “expert.” In this way, the CoP framework was operationalised as an analytical and interpretative tool within this jazz ensemble study.

The Context

The Limerick Jazz Workshop (LJW) was a not-for-profit body to provide jazz ensemble teaching environments in the south-west of Ireland. There were four instrumental ensembles which ranged from beginners to advanced and for the purpose of rehearsal only, an extra vocalists ensemble. The workshop sessions lasted two-hours and ran two semesters of 12 weeks each where participants joined ensembles under the guidance of expert tutors. There was no restriction given on the age range but it generally spanned from 18 years to participants in their 60s with a mix of gender (though predominantly male). This research study focussed specifically on one jazz ensemble within the LJW.

The jazz ensemble studied began their autumn semester 2010 with five instrumentalists and two singers (‘singers’ was the term used by the ensemble as opposed to vocalists). In the spring semester this increased to seven instrumentalists. The seven instruments played were: two bass guitars, acoustic guitar, saxophone, vibraphone, flute and drums. The instrumentalists were all male and the singers female. One of the bass guitarists was the tutor and the saxophone player was also the LJW coordinator. This ensemble was the most advanced of the LJW with some of the participants regularly playing professional gigs outside of the workshop. Four nationalities were represented in the ensemble; Irish, German, Italian and English and they varied in age from early 20s to mid 50s. The repertoire chosen was from a broad jazz style and ranged from jazz “standards” to contemporary jazz to jazz fusion pieces.

The Case Study

A case study approach was employed where data was gathered over a nine-month period (October 2010 – June 2011). The qualitative data methods aimed to capture both group and individual perspectives from the jazz ensemble and included:

- 10 two-hour workshop sessions (video data and observations)
- Two performances/gigs (video data and observations)

- 1 focus group interview with participants
- 6 individual participant logs
- 1 interview with ensemble coordinator
- 1 interview with ensemble tutor

As the actions, behaviours, relationships and complex realities of the jazz ensemble were at the centre of the inquiry, the video recordings and observation fieldnotes were the primary data sources in this case study.

The kind of observational research that was engaged in was participant observation. Although not directly involved in musical activities of the group, I became a part of workshop sessions and was included in conversations and “in-jokes” as time went on. The video data also gained first-hand information as it happened but also provided a tangible record for the study. In this way the videos acted as (Erickson, 2006, p. 177):

a continuous and relatively comprehensive record of social interaction, a document that is to some extent phenomenologically neutral, that is the video recorder does not think while it records.

Using video data, the learning that occurred during the complex social collective interactions within these communities provided the best opportunity of being captured. The video data of workshop sessions and performances helped to ensure as holistic account as possible and reduced the threat to researcher bias while in the field.

The interviews in the study took a semi-structured approach. A focus group interview with members of the jazz ensemble aimed to gain collective insights whereas the individual interviews with the workshop coordinator and ensemble tutor allowed for individual perspectives from key “actors.” The participant logs provided rich understandings into members’ perceptions of their experiences within the jazz ensemble as it unfolded over time.

Findings, Analysis and Discussion

A holistic thematic analysis deployed the CoP framework as a tool for interpretation and analysis. The three dimensions of the CoP model of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire, as well as the 14 indicators of a CoP (Wenger, 1998, pp. 125-126), manifested themselves consistently throughout the data analysis of the jazz ensemble study. Using the three dimensions as a broad thematic framework, the findings are presented.

Mutual Engagement

Mutual engagement is defined by Wenger as the “source of coherence of a community” (1998, p. 73) and involves exploring the domain of knowledge within the community. In this way “shared knowledge” is created and built through mutual engagement where the learning is “situated” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The jazz ensemble as a CoMP developed in a particular city and in particular ways that was distinctive to the groups’ identity.

There was a clear *modus operandi* or shared ways of doing things within the jazz ensemble. This manifested itself from how a workshop session began, to how it ended, to the manner in which they made music together. For example, there were no welcome or parting formalities between the group. Equally, there was no lead in time in discussing what would be played or how. Instead, issues were dealt with between or after playing. In this manner, the jazz

ensemble resonated deeply with what Wenger describes as an indicator of a CoP as having “an absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations were merely the continuation of an ongoing process” (1998, p. 125).

There were also clear “norms” or as Becker would ascribe to any “art world “conventions” (Becker, 2008) attached with the performance nights. Eric noted; “performance is a skill in itself that needs practice” (Eric, log 3). There was a sense of a jazz performance “tradition” present, a “performance practice” notable through such procedures as: the positioning of the ensemble from Jimmy the tutor standing in the background to the solo singers taking centre stage, the format of the tunes where solo improvisation sections were taken in turn and could last up to six minutes, the casual atmosphere where banter and “insider” jokes were shared with the audience, to certain musical cues and gestures such as touching the head to return to the main tune. In this way the members were learning through participation in their “social world” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or “art world” where the rules and focus were consistently in negotiation. Thus, the practice was “transformed” through its members and ultimately the performance was a result of “a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome” (Becker, 2008, p. 25).

‘Legitimate peripheral participation’ as first described by Lave and Wenger (1991) entails an apprenticeship model of learning where social practice and context are all important. Here “newcomers” learn through practice from “old-timers” in their journey from “peripheral” to “full” participation. The members of the ensemble very much saw themselves as learning the “jazz trade” and throughout the data analysis there were many indicators that would see most of the group as peripheral participants in their learning. Ryan noted:

I certainly wouldn't in anyway be putting myself in that category of professional players but have that sense of being a very small part of that broader tradition (Ryan, focus group interview, 15/4/11).

Jimmy, the tutor was seen as holding the “expert knowledge” within the group and so could be recognised as an “old-timer” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Jimmy’s pedagogical style fluctuated between formal and informal approaches. For example, often methodical, step-by-step approaches were employed when learning a new tune, very much following a model whereby knowledge is “taught” to students. Jimmy took a leadership or “master” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) role in such instances, and relied on learning tools such as recordings and notation. However, there were shifts in Jimmy’s leadership style where he also engaged in more non-traditional teaching methods, which could be described, as informal in approach. For example, he invited members to begin tunes, regularly passed over his leadership through asking others to suggest what to do with a tune, and consistently encouraged members to set the tempo. In this manner a great deal of shared group learning occurred throughout the sessions.

Joint Enterprise

Within the CoP model Wenger describes joint enterprise as a *process* within a community of people where there is: a “negotiated enterprise”; “an indigenous enterprise” and a “regime of mutual accountability” (1998, pp. 77-82). The jazz ensemble as a CoMP went through a ongoing “process of negotiation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 77) of their practices throughout the rehearsal sessions and performances. This was seen through such practices as starting late. The *stated* start time was 7pm but in reality this time was *negotiated* by the members by

communally accepting that not everyone would show up at this time and there were therefore no consequences for poor punctuality. Furthermore, collective decisions were often negotiated as seen in the extract below:

Jimmy: (referring to upcoming performance) Any ideas on the order? Anybody want to do it in a specific order? We've got five tunes isn't it?
 Eric: Yeah I think the one "Interplay" should go at the end because it's the one everybody does
 Jimmy: Yeah sure
 Eric: Everyone's involved
 Jimmy: That's the last one
 Jack: Start with the "Prism," it's a nice one to start with...
 Jimmy:...and what "s the other two? We've got three other songs then
 Jack: There's one we have Jackle
 Eric: Jackle
 Jack: We have eh...
 Jimmy: "Taste of Honey" maybe in the middle...
 Jack: ...yeah "Prism," "Jackle"
 Eric: Something very memorable...
 (workshop video 10, 3/6/11)

Throughout the data analysis the shared goals of the jazz ensemble emerged as ranging from learning/advancing their playing of jazz music, playing within a collective, building confidence to play in new ways, enjoying themselves and performing in live situations. The negotiation of shared goals through the CoMP was apparent in some of the log entries. For example, Leona noted a change in expectation for her over time:

All I had expected was just regular practice and perhaps learning some new songs. Over the years it has become much more challenging, as the band has progressed as well (Leona, participant log 1).

Performance itself was also seen as highly important to all members and a way of gauging progression. Jack commented on it being a; "true test of playing to a live audience" (Jack, participant log 2). Furthermore, all of the rehearsal sessions were essentially building up to this "larger enterprise" of performance, where not only was it a chance to demonstrate their progression in playing but was seen as pivotal to their enjoyment of being part of the ensemble. An overwhelming regime of "mutual accountability" was present throughout the data analysis of the jazz ensemble. This was evident in the participant logs where absenteeism was referred to with guilt and not feeling up to standard musically was referred to often as "letting the group down."

Shared Repertoire

Through a history of mutual engagement and a process of joint enterprise built up through practice, shared repertoire are viewed as "resources for negotiating meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 82). These resources were evident through shared ways of doing things from the use of stories, jokes, artifacts, tools, concepts and discourses within the ensemble. Jimmy as bandleader stood as the "expert" in the domain of jazz and so facilitated induction into a "jazz world" through discourse within musical and social processes. This dual approach to teaching and learning was most evident in Jimmy's consistent use of what could be classified

as “jazz lore” - essentially jazz stories, anecdotes and jokes. The below extract shows one such example of this:

Jimmy: (to Beatrice)...the lyrics in front of you are a blockage in terms of trying to communicate something to people...I remember playing with a singer once and my uncle was on drums and she had a tendency not to make any contact with anybody...eventually my uncle at a gig one night, he got a flag made up with the word “NOW” written on it (everyone laughs) and about two bars before she was due back in he'd just shout her name and start waving the flag – and it still didn't work. (everyone laughs)
(workshop video 9, 29/3/11)

Jimmy here through “jazz lore” emphasised the need in jazz music for group contact during playing. It was evident that he really feels it is important for Beatrice to learn such elements of the “jazz trade” but equally he is involving everyone in the group through his “storytelling.”

Jokes, laughter and a sense of fun made up a significant part of the jazz ensemble’s shared ways of doing things. This was repeatedly remarked on at both interviews and within the participant logs as being an essential part to being a member of the group and also a motivation to stay involved. This “fun” element to the group often functioned as a way to lighten the mood, as a tool for learning, promote a feeling of belonging or simply as a break from the intensity of playing. The jokes utilised within the ensemble were often genre-specific or music-specific and so carried with them values, concepts and traditions of a jazz canon.

Recordings of jazz music emerged as important “artifacts” for the ensemble and this had been in-built into their practice. Listening to recordings and employing them as learning tools was regarded as just as important as the notation itself. It was obvious in the video analysis that the members saw an enormous worth in linking the eye and ear in learning jazz. The use of recordings were referenced regularly within the participant logs where listening was regarded as essential to their practicing habits of jazz music. As well as this members frequently recommended certain albums, artists or Youtube links to each other.

Conclusion

Through investigating the way the jazz ensemble operated, learned, made meaning, interacted, formed relationships and developed practices, the study presented an important “window” into musical participation within a specific a CoP model. The findings of this case study also have implications for perspectives on community music as well as music teaching and learning. The importance of group music making opportunities where membership and participation are promoted, identities nurtured, diversity encouraged, relationships developed over time and formal and informal approaches utilised, were clearly evident within the data analysis. In analysing this one case in one city, the analysis is rooted in a micro practice but is located within the broader macro framework of local, national and international contexts. Learning within the ensemble was an endeavour of knowledge building, sharing, negotiation and transformation that ensured meaning making was both collaborative and “situated.” Wenger (1998, p. 85) explains:

Communities of practice...are a force to be reckoned with...such communities hold the key to real transformation—the kind that has real effects on peoples’ lives.

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