Producing Tomorrow's Producers: Audio Engineering as a Tool for Facilitation

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"Ideal teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own." – Nikos Kazantzakis

In a makeshift rehearsal space and sound studio, tucked away in a Brooklyn apartment that might have seemed dingy were it not for the brightly colored artwork on the walls and the assortment of instruments scattered around, thirty adults stood in a circle playing a name game. Each person took a turn saying his or her name in a sonically unique way, pairing the utterance with an exaggerated action. Some raised their arms and sang their name in an operatic falsetto, others experimented with syncopated rhythms and animated dances, and still others simply stepped forward and declared their name in a stern monotone. After each miniature performance, the rest of the group would imitate the sound and action.

These men and women were not preparing for a middle school orientation: they were a new team of facilitators, celebrating the successful completion of their one-week training workshop with the group Modern Improvisational Music Appreciation (MIMA). The premise of MIMA is to empower communities by collectively writing an original song and recording a music video via a fourfold method: inspire, transform, create, and celebrate. The group was founded in 2004, and has done work in Argentina, Brazil, China, Germany and several other countries, in addition to their relatively new Brooklyn-centered project.

However, while MIMA does effectively bring communities together during the course of its workshops and facilitations, we believe that the participants are left without tangible means of documenting their newfound creativity. An end product is always created, but it is experienced MIMA engineers who undertake the brunt of the production work (i.e. video and sound editing). Therefore, while the experience is undoubtedly beneficial for those involved, and provides insight into the ease of, for example, the filming portion of a music video, at the end of the day participants wouldn't be able to replicate the experience or the final product without the help of MIMA facilitators.

As two undergraduate students at Princeton University taking a course on Community-Based Performance with Professor Erica Nagel, we were impressed by MIMA's mission. We identified the program's lack of focus on technical production training as an opportunity for progress. As our final project for the course, we decided to design a pilot workshop as an extension of the MIMA method, focusing specifically on putting the creative power of media into the hands of the participants. By teaching individuals how to create, record, and edit digital music, we hoped to open doors to a larger musical world, enabling them to create long after we as instructors had left the room. Our intentions for this workshop were twofold. Our ultimate goal was to equip the kids with the skills needed to produce and record their own music on GarageBand, a

computer program that allows users to create their own music. In the process we hoped to stimulate their desire to play and create musically, catalyzing their development into empowered, capable musicians. On a larger scale, we hope to turn this pilot project into a model for a full-length workshop series. This paper will discuss our experience running the workshop with the intention of using what we learned to design a more effective lesson plan in the future.

Expectations and Reality

As facilitators, our hope was to do exactly that: *to facilitate,* to make something easy despite how complicated it may initially seem. Both of us had benefitted and grown as aspiring musicians when, at a young age, we discovered GarageBand's accessibility and ease of use. Our goal with this pilot workshop was to do the same for a small group of kids from undetermined social, economic, and musical backgrounds in a condensed period. In order to achieve this goal, we needed to distill the complex world of music production into a few key concepts, the framework of essentials without which one could not produce.

In some ways, our experience was similar to Augusto Boal's implementation of techniques addressing the "Theatre of the Oppressed." He notes, "I was able only to explain the mechanics of the different techniques, without ever being in a position to carry out an in-depth analysis" (1992, 18). Although on a smaller scale and with more established variables, the success of our workshop also depended on boiling down and effectively communicating the mechanics of a few essential techniques, such as live audio recording and rearranging loops, each linked to a greater facet of music production. This process was made substantially easier by GarageBand's user-friendly interface.

In the initial design of our project, we decided to lead the kids through several incremental steps of learning. Our intention was to first catch their attention with a project that we had put together ourselves, then to transition them slowly from being observers to being creators: first by experimenting with and altering our piece, then by starting their own pieces from scratch, and gradually incorporating more advanced techniques, such as applying audio compressors and creating original MIDI loops on the digital keyboard. We believed that by progressing in small steps, we would cover more ground without overwhelming the kids. Once they saw their own progress after the two-hour workshop, we hoped they would feel empowered. Since we would only have one chance to work with the kids, an essential aspect of our initial design was a focus on the future: how to make our two-hour facilitation not a one-time gimmick but the planting of a seed, a starting point for the development of real sound engineering expertise should the kids wish to pursue it.

Of course, as often occurs with facilitation, things rarely go as planned. In his training manual for effective facilitation, Michael Rohd remarks that to be a good facilitator, you must be "confident in your role as tone-setter and guide, not in having everything all figured out ahead of time" (1998, 113-4). Adaptability is essential to success – a good facilitator must take cues from his or her collaborators. We were forced to do so almost immediately, since the initial project we had prepared wouldn't open, and the boys had no interest in engaging with our warm-up activities. Instead of giving us their names as we asked, they told us the names of the girls each of them had a crush on. One of the games we tried to play with the kids was "Human DJ," a MIMA exercise

where each participant is allowed to conduct the others in a collaborative a cappella improvisation, similar to Augusto Boal's "Rhythm Machine" (1992, 94). Although one of the boys participated fully in the game, creating a complex beat with his voice, the others quickly resorted to banging on chairs and tables. They were unfocused, rowdy, and in the case of one boy, totally disengaged.

In order to counteract the devolution of our planned curriculum, we moved quickly to what interested the students: the computers. Instead of transitioning from working with our project to designing their own, we helped them start their own projects from scratch, then began a rotation system, where every student would switch computers and work on his neighbor's project. Each time a rotation occurred, we set them a definitive goal – the first time, it was to build off the predecessor's work. Since this resulted in two distinct approaches appearing in nearly every project, we made our goal the second time to achieve continuity between the two voices, making one coherent piece.

Forced adaptation of this manner actually strengthened our workshop process, and allowed us to discuss concepts that weren't in our initial curriculum, such as collaboration and musicality. While there are other specific examples of our attempts to adapt to the unexpected, the bottom line is that our facilitation was ameliorated by the fact that we were forced to stay on our toes. Instead of pedagogic monologue, we had to maintain a dialogue with the students, responding to what captured their interest and addressing issues that only became apparent once we were off and running.

Successes and Lessons Learned

Upon reflection of our approaches after the workshop ended, we found that much of the adaptation made on our original schedule ultimately helped achieve our initial goals and even opened doors for further collaboration.

Each time we let the kids break off on their own to build their recordings, we would reconvene after 10 to 15 minutes to allow them to showcase their work. We found sharing creations in this manner was essential in giving kids a sense of ownership of their work; to let them know that no matter what stage their product was in, it deserved to be heard by the rest of the group.

An issue we hit early on during the workshop was an attitude of competitiveness among the kids, with sentiments such as one's recording being "better" than another's. To combat this, everyone applauded each other's work during each showcase, giving equal recognition to each participant's recording.

Rotating computers after each showcasing also counteracted competitiveness while enforcing a spirit of collaboration. During the first rotation, the kids were given a chance to contribute their own creativity to what was already made. In order to maintain a positive energy among the kids, we required that the ideal of the "cosmic yes," a catchphrase coined by acting teacher and scholar Anna Pilleggi meaning "to assume each others' brilliance," be upheld among the kids. We advised the kids not to delete anything, but they were allowed to move loops around, making them deal with any musical "issues" that may has arisen instead of simply getting rid of them. This latter approach is akin to Rohd's concept of magic, or solving "a problem by getting rid of a problem rather than dealing with it" (121). In addition, there were five kids in the computer lab using four computers, so at any given moment there were two kids sharing a computer, putting

a twist on the collaborating process. Initially the computer-to-participant ratio was 1:1, but one of the computers could not log in at the start of the workshop, thus forcing us to adapt to the situation. In hindsight, this change in plan gave the kids an opportunity to simultaneously collaborate, something that wouldn't have happened had all of the computers been available.

One of our approaches that didn't work as well as we'd hoped was our collaborative movement and sound-based exercise. The entire workshop took place in the computer lab, and playing "Human DJ" at the beginning of the workshop caused the kids to become distracted by the computers, making it difficult for them to become engaged in the activity. We speculate that perhaps such a facilitation game would be more effective if we placed it in the middle of the workshop instead, after the kids had had a chance to work on the computers. Playing "Human DJ" after having the kids create their own recordings would help them make the connection between computerized loops and their own bodies and voices – both are equally musical and are manipulated just as easily.

In addition, the pilot workshop itself ran for two hours, which was difficult for kids in their particular age group to sit through. In future workshops, we would plan to cut down the amount of time spent in front of the computer and intersperse a few breaks throughout, either to play aforementioned facilitation games or recharge with snacks.

There were a few demographically confounding variables that we would take into consideration when planning a future workshop. To begin, all five of the participants in the pilot workshop were boys. We did not know whether they specifically signed up to attend the workshop or came because they were the only people in attendance at Community House that afternoon. Either way, we found that it had an impact on the facilitation process, as they seemed to engage more with Ben than with Emi.

Some of the participants had more prior experience with GarageBand than others, but those who were complete beginners were able to learn quickly. However, the quality of the end product is greatly influenced by the level of musical sensibility on the individual's part: while everyone could move loops around, they didn't quite grasp fundamental concepts like the difference between starting a loop at the beginning of a bar and starting it in the middle. To make the workshopping process as equally beneficial to everyone as possible, the full-scale workshop should target participants with similar musical abilities.

Moving Forward

Our hope for this pilot was that the kids would continue to cultivate the skills they had picked up beyond the workshop. To our delight, they asked if GarageBand was accessible on all Macs and if they would be able to work on their projects post-workshop. At the end of the workshop we informed the kids about logging onto YouTube for additional tutorials on GarageBand.

In developing a full-scale workshop series, we would focus more attention on developing a sense of community among the participants, allowing our workshops to become a familiar, supportive creative space to which the students could return each week. This is something that we simply didn't have enough time to foster organically.

Recommended Lesson Plan

Below is a distilled version of what we learned from our workshop in the form of a lesson plan, which we would implement if we were to run a similar workshop in the future.

Part 1: Getting Started

- Dive right in! Get the kids excited about what we're doing right away.
    - Remember that children have short attention spans. Capitalize on what interests the kids. Use the computers to earn their attention, instead of immediately working to pull attention away from the computers.
- From the start, foster an interactive, self-reflective, non-competitive environment for the creation of projects.
    - Start by having each participant begin his or her own project, then rotate stations after a set period of time.
        - We recommend a longer initial period for the development of a base project: i.e., a 20 minute period followed by two or three ten minute periods. That way the participants have more to work with.
    - Decide on a straightforward goal for every time period, so that the students have something towards which to work.
        - E.g. Try to make the piece your working with flow continuously, instead of being a combination of distinct musical ideas.

Part 2: The Change-Up

- Break the participants out of the comfort zone that they have begun to develop with the program. We recommend physically leaving the room where the computers are located, to minimize distraction.
    - Use this time to engage in a more interpersonal activity. For example, we might have had more success with "Human DJ" had we attempted it at this point in the workshop, instead of using it as a warm-up.
        - Whatever the activity, be sure to tie it back to what has already been learned. In the case of "Human DJ," discuss how similar pulling together loops on GarageBand and getting a group of people to make individual, repeated, rhythmic noises really are.
        - Raise questions with the activity. How does the activity make the participants think differently about their productions?

Part 3: The Culmination

- Return to the lab with the intention of linking the skills learned in Part 1 with the questions raised in Part 2.
    - One way to do this is to add a more advanced component, such as recording live audio input, and then coordinating the entire class to work together to create a project. Nothing gets someone excited about sound engineering like hearing their own voice played back to them.
        - Be sure to let the students control the production as much as possible. At this point might be easy to resort to leading instead

of guiding, especially when there is a shortage of time. To avoid this, have the students sit in front of the computer and choose and place the loops into the GarageBand project themselves.

- Our workshop ran out of time and so we had to commandeer the creation of a final product just so it could be completed. This is the MIMA model, and something we'd like to work past.

Part 4: Takeaways

- Help the participants understand how what they've learned applies to their future. The workshop is worthless if it's not approached as the first step of many.
- We've given them tools, we've opened the door. Now it's their time to take what they've learned and run with it!

Conclusions

This project helped clarify several elements of facilitation practice. In this final section, we'd like to consider a few final elements of the project, its scope, and its implications for our future: How can the lesson plan outlined here be extrapolated to create a semester-long course? What elements of our course were community-based? How could we focus on those elements in a longer course?

In terms of extending the lesson plan as a framework for a longer-term course, we once again encounter the question of distilling out the essentials. Our pilot project affirmed the importance of our initial goals: inspiring the kids to create music and equipping them with the necessary skills, building their self-confidence as empowered, capable producers. However, we also discovered that other elements were equally important. For example, collaboration – in the form of showcasing one's own work and appreciating the work of others, as well as actually working on a project with a partner – was key to our workshop's success, since it promoted an atmosphere of equality and supportiveness. We also learned to nurture the kids' musicality, encouraging them to produce sounds they would enjoy listening to.

We believe that our course structure could serve as a skeleton for courses with other topics on the agenda: for example, introduction to media software of any kind and even the beginning stages of musical or theatrical performance training. The basic principles of engaging the kids, holding their attention, adapting, and using the tools at hand (such as a computer, which could potentially pose a major distraction but also enables the success of the workshop) apply regardless of the topic at hand. This basic framework allows us to pursue accomplishments that require more than a two hour workshop: for example, how to gear sound engineering skills toward a community-based performance.

Perhaps the most coherent explanation of what makes a performance community-based comes from Richard Geer who posits his theory of "Of, By, and For." According to Geer, for a performance to be community-based, it must be of the people (performance about the community), by the people (created by community members), and for the people (performed in the presence of and in support of a previously constituted

community) (1998). A performance can embody only one or two of these elements – for example, a group of middle school students performing Shakespeare would be *by* but not *of*, and potentially not *for*, depending on the scope of the performance and how closely it related to the particulars of the community in which it was performed.

Our workshop wasn't a performance (beyond us performing the roles of facilitator for the boys), so analyzing whether it was *of*, *by*, or *for* a community is unproductive. However, the tools we gave the participants enable them to create work *by* them. This is where the potential of a longer-term course comes in. Once the participants are capable of creating work *by* them, then they are able to choose the *of* and *for* of their performance. This is consistent with Geer's concept of community performance: "True community performance is not an event but a continuous cycle. Through it the community is able to see itself and respond" (1998, xxxii). Our goal was to provide the kids with the tools to create this type of performance – not one that will culminate in a single instance of exposure, but instead the beginning of a constant dynamic interchange rooted in performance. We did not create a community-based performance, but we were able to facilitate an experience where the kids scratched the surface of what it would be like to have that creative ability. This empowerment could complement the MIMA mission. MIMA workshops are about creating original performance. If the kids are also able to capture and manipulate that performance (as opposed to, say, pre-recorded GarageBand loops) without external guidance, they then control the entire value chain of creation: they can make their own community-based performance.

Of course this is a lofty idea for a ten-year-old to grasp. Perhaps the most effective way to guide them down this path of community performance would be to gear future classes toward exploration of themselves, their communities, what is important to them, what upsets them, etc. Then the next leap would be addressing and communicating these feelings through music. The performance would then be *of* and *by* the participants. Finally comes the *for*, which is the fun part: taking the tools of artistic creation and the ideals of the participants and bringing them into the venue where they matter most: the community. This might be their parents, their schoolmates, anyone they interact with on a daily basis and identify with on a community level. The addition of this audience creates the potential for a positive feedback loop – response to their performance will engender discussion and more performance. In this way, our course could have a sweeping impact far beyond simply teaching a few kids how to play with GarageBand.

References

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