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Processes of Learning in the Project Studio

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The emergence of the project studio is a story of increasing access to ever more powerful technologies that allow music to be produced in increasingly diverse circumstances. In 1973, *Melody Maker* responded, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to an emerging trend by offering basic advice about setting up a home studio: 'about half the garages and basements in England must be echoing to the siren song of rock music by now; everybody's building their own recording studios' (Blake, 1973). Théberge (1997, pp. 52-3) identifies the same year as a milestone in the emergence of a viable market for consumer music technologies because sales of electronic synthesisers were first tracked as a separate category. Technological innovation, economic viability and the socio-cultural impetus to make music with technology coincide in the early 1970s to create the conditions for the eventual emergence of the domestic project studio.

While technologies had been deployed in domestic settings from the 1930s (and earlier), they were relatively expensive and only capable of documenting events (Brock-Nannestad, 2012). More sophisticated technologies were developed in the 1950s and 60s, though these were often idiosyncratic and highly specialised (Théberge, 2004), built by 'tinkerers' from a lineage of mechanical and electrical engineers (Horning, 2004, p. 721). From the early 1960s, the nascent electronic musical instrument and music technology industries developed more standardised

designs and processes of manufacture, which brought down costs and expanded the potential market. At the higher end of the market, 'star performers' assembled home studios 'to experiment and create while relatively unfettered by the constraints of time and money' (Théberge, 1997, pp. 231-2) imposed by professional studios. The equipment aimed at the lower end of the market could only produce demo-quality material and as such posed no real threat to the professional establishment (Wadsworth, 2007, p. 53). The integration of microprocessors and music devices during the late 1970s was a reciprocal innovation between computer and music technology industries that delivered cheaper, more flexible devices. In the 1980s, a new studio environment emerged: 'so-called "project studios" – often little more than large home installations' (Théberge, 2004, p. 773). This new form of studio environment had a significant impact on recording practices and the commerciality of the recording studio industry (Leyshon, 2009). The story continues into the 1990s with increasing processing power giving rise to better integration of digital audio and MIDI sequencing capabilities along with ever-expanding track counts (Théberge, 2004, p. 774). And then, into the 2000s, ever miniaturised, mobilised and ubiquitous technologies allowed 'extended movement of social actors into geographic locations previously unusable as places for sonic creativity' (Slater and Martin, 2012, p. 72).

The terms 'home studio' and 'project studio' are often used interchangeably, perhaps because of the historical root of such technological 'assemblages' (Born, 2005, p. 8) being situated in the home. I prefer the term 'project studio' because it avoids designating one particular type of place and maintains the dynamic possibility of active location (Slater, 2016). The 'project studio', as an umbrella term, encompasses an unknowable range of possibilities and variations. There is no neat designation: project studios can produce professional-standard material (though they

might also be the realm of amateur hobbyists); there can be a flow, of people and materials, between project studios and professional studios in the overall process of bringing music into being; projects studios may be as stable as professional studios (architecturally, economically and in reputation) but they may also be in a constant state of flux in terms of the technologies that constitute them, and the practices and materials that are explored there.

Proliferation of technologies leads to a proliferation of creative practices across expanding socio-demographic and geographic planes (Greene 2001; Crowdy 2007). Given this context, existing outside formal institutions, in spare rooms, bedrooms and garages, how do people learn what they need to know? Specialist music technology programmes are now a well-established part of the music education landscape, providing access to expertise and to equipment and architectural spaces beyond the reach of most individuals. But engagement with musico-technological creativity is a significantly broader field, ranging from basic equipment to professional set-ups often (but not necessarily) situated in the home, supported by specialist print publications, forums, websites and consumer textbooks. This non-institutional context, in which people learn what they need to know, as they need to know it, is where the gaze of this chapter falls.

The ideas presented here are derived from a case study of a collaborative music project – Middlewood Sessions – that existed for a little less than eight years. Prior to the release of a nine-track album in February 2012, Middlewood Sessions had three singles released (paired with two remixes) on two established record labels,[1] achieved support from international radio and club DJs, and performed six live UK gigs – all of which received some critical acclaim (formal and otherwise). Such a

[1] Brownswood Recordings (2007) and Wah Wah 45s (2008).

case-study approach provides a detailed, idiographic insight into one manifestation of collaborative creativity in a project studio setting. In the final part of the chapter, I will present findings relating to *what* was being learned and *how* this learning took place by identifying and describing four categories and four general processes. Prior to that, and prompted by the need to find ways of talking about learning from a standpoint external to formal institutions and curricula, I present a review of music education literature that explores the relationship between formal and informal styles of learning (eventually to reject this binary) giving rise to a proposal for *five dimensions of learning*. The goals of this chapter are twofold: to present something of the particular case study in an attempt to derive some insight into the possible processes of learning at play in the lived-out context of the project studio; and to engage with music education literature in the formulation of a theoretical tool to facilitate a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the nature of particular instances of learning activity.

Researching Middlewood Sessions

The research project began in 2006 just as Middlewood Sessions' first track, 'Fall Back', was beginning to receive national (UK) and international radio play. Data were collected via participant diaries and four semi-structured interviews (spanning May 2007 to November 2011), which were analysed according to principles of thematic identification derived from interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) and organised using an adaptation of Spradley's (1980) nine-point model for carrying out descriptive participant observations. Starting tentatively in August 2004, there were originally two members constituting Middlewood Sessions (including me); this tally grew over the subsequent years to

include an additional twenty-eight contributors (musicians, visual artists and technicians) plus, importantly, a sound engineer who became the third 'core' member. Each 'core' participants' background is summarily sketched here to indicate something of their histories and prior experiences.

- P_1 invokes a range of subgenres (hip hop, trip hop, broken beat, drum n bass, acid jazz) and DJs (Gilles Peterson, Patrick Forge, Coldcut, DJ Food and Mr. Scruff), which reveals an experiential basis, as listener and practitioner, rooted in DJ culture. This constitutes the primary knowledge base brought to bear on Middlewood Sessions alongside some basic training in studio production techniques.
- P_2 cites particular eras of jazz music (late big band swing, bebop, cool and modal jazz plus funk) and electronica (Massive Attack, Portishead). These influences are set against a backdrop of formal university education in music, during which modernist and experimentalist composers were encountered (Cage, Feldman, Cardew, Finnissy, Stravinsky). Music technologies and associated practices did not figure in this participant's prior experience.
- P_3 abandoned jazz trumpet during his degree studies in favour of a career in music production, motivated by an interest in the crossover between music and physics. As the third core member, joining in the final third of the life of Middlewood Sessions, this participant brought technical expertise in recording techniques and post-production processes.

Participants came to the project with different levels and types of musical and technical expertise, but all were starting from scratch with one another in this

particular creative endeavour. While there was some combined prior experience with composition and music production technologies, there was no pre-determined objective (except to try to make some good music) and there was no pre-existing technological configuration. Given this starting position, there must have been considerable effort given over to learning all of what was required to put the project studio together, to get the music made and, eventually, out to an audience.

The research project remained focussed on the three core members as a means of tracing the aspirations and activities that drove the creative endeavour from the perspective of the most central and continuous participants. The use of interviews and diaries was instrumental in capturing something of the story of Middlewood Sessions as it was unfolding; but, of course, my status as participant and researcher (and now author) must be acknowledged. Despite the objectifying processes of data capture and analysis (and the passage of not an insignificant amount of time), some remnants of my predilections and biases are bound to remain (not to mention my influence on events at the time; see Yin, 2009, pp. 101-3 and pp. 111-13). This position is at once valuable (because of the 'insider perspective' it permits) but limited (in that it will inevitably lead to a particular reading of the data).

Dimensions of Learning

Those making music in a project studio discover what skills and knowledge they need as they go along. This self-directed process of learning, taking place outside educational institutions and formal curricula, resembles *informal learning*, which 'has been defined as "the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes, and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment"' (Coombs and Ahmed, 1974 cited in Jenkins, 2011, p. 181). Self-

motivation is a predominant factor in determining an informal learning style, along with how that learning is sequenced. Folkestad states that in 'the *formal* learning situation, the activity is sequenced beforehand … [by] a person who takes on the task of organising and leading the learning activity' (2006, p. 141, original emphasis). Participants in a project studio motivate themselves to make music, though there might not be any pre-determined pattern for how this will happen and the eventual goal (whether to make a single track, EP or album, or what technology and musical materials to use) might not be known in advance. Furthermore, there may be no clear distinction between carrying out the creative activity and *learning* how to carry it out; they are one and the same.

While the terms 'informal' and 'formal' turn out to be problematic, the related body of music education research is instructive in how it acknowledges and critiques the potential value of absorbing so-called informal practices into formal pedagogy. There is a direction of flow – from practice to praxis – in the music education literature, which has a centre-point around rock-based performance practices at high-school level (Fornäs, Lindberg and Sernhede, 1995; Green, 2002; Jaffurs, 2004; Davis, 2005). In other words, there is a clustering of interest around style (rock), mode of engagement (performance), age group and educational context (high school), which sets up the strands that are variously inflected and extended.

Väkevä (2010) explores the impact of 'digital musicking' by anyone with a computer with 'entry-level software like GarageBand®' with reference to remix and mash-up cultures. Savage (2005) assesses the impact of the presence of music technologies in the classroom for compositional activity; Söderman and Folkestad (2004) observe how two hip hop 'communes' create music using technologies in a studio setting. Prior to the classroom context, Finney and Philpott (2010) expound the

integration of informal learning into initial teacher training and Robinson (2012) explores how instrumental teachers' learning histories, including experience of informal and formal approaches, influence their eventual teaching practice. Partti and Karlsen (2010) build on an earlier case study by Salavuo (2006) exploring online 'communities of practice' in which knowledge about music is shared and discussed; two studies by Waldron (2009; 2013) explore the interaction between offline and online folk music communities. Beyond compulsory education age groups, Feichas (2010) explores university students' attitudes towards studying music and Karlsen problematises informal pedagogy in a rock-based higher education programme in Sweden by questioning the ability of informal approaches to 'remain informal when included in formal education' (2010, p. 36). Thompson (2012) presents an enquiry into the learning strategies of DJs, turntablists, dance and hip hop producers with a view to extending the repertoire of learning practices in higher education to include electronic musicianship as well as instrumental rock-based approaches.

Against this groundswell of support for understanding what informal learning is and what it offers, Jenkins warns that 'approaches that have fallen under the banner of "informal" have often been subject to bandwagon over-enthusiasm, with proponents inflating their virtues beyond what the concept appears to warrant' (2011, p. 180). He asks: 'If informal learning is so pervasive, why is there a need for formal learning?' (p. 181). Cain (2013) addresses a similar question by presenting a case study of formal pedagogy in comparison with the informal pedagogy developed by Green (2008). To paraphrase Cain (2013, pp. 77-78): why should informal approaches be regarded as ideal, liberatory, authentic, true and good compared with the supposed rigidity and artificiality of boring formal approaches? In concluding his empirical study, he calls for the two-dimensional view of formal and informal, existing at

opposite ends of a continuum, to be abandoned in favour of other ways of thinking about the higher-level aims of a pedagogical approach (such as 'transmission' and 'authentic reproduction'; p. 16).

The general consensus is that a rounded music education will feature a mixture of formal and informal approaches to learning, and that this pedagogical mixture has been established for quite some time now. This subsumption of previously (and falsely) dichotomous approaches into one pedagogical outlook collapses any clear distinction between the formal and the informal; an effect compounded by the prevalence of technology that provides access to tools, information, materials and communities – the same technology that propagates the creative music practices of interest here. Given this collapse, attempts to define one or the other are at best definitions of *learning styles* that are subsumed into a broader mixed pedagogy. While attempts to define informal and formal learning are flawed because the implicit contradistinction via comparison of *contexts* (the garage versus the classroom) and *agents* (teacher versus student) has been thoroughly undermined by information technologies, a meta-analysis of work by Jenkins (2011, citing Beckett and Hager, 2002), Folkestad (2006), Green (2008) and, antithetically, Cain (2013) provides a theoretical basis for tracing and describing the nature of learning processes at a given point. This framework consists of five dimensions of learning that emerge once each set of definitions is remapped to show how common strands align. Table 1.1 juxtaposes the four sets of definitions in the top half and reorganises these according to the emergent five dimensions of learning in the bottom half. The five dimensions are ordered non-hierarchically and non-chronologically (each dimension is implicated in all learning) though there is some logic in the flow between them: *intentionality* (whether learning is the primary focus or not) is dependent upon *agency*

(identifying who motivates the learning), which in turn affects the *patterning* of activities that afford opportunities for developing *experience* or *conceptual* knowledge that has a *socio-architectural* dimension (happening at a particular time, in a particular place).