

Facilitation as leadership: empowering individuals within the collective — a Soundcastle International Exchange in São Paulo, Brazil

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In January 2012 our arts collective, Soundcastle, took part in Creative Voices, an intercultural exchange in São Paulo, Brazil. We aimed to develop and share our professional skills as music workshop leaders with Brazilian music teachers and students, as well as experience Brazilian traditional music and attitudes to music-making. In this chapter we describe our experience of delivering an informal, collaborative approach to composition and music-making within the Brazilian environment of Espaço Musical, a private music school in São Paulo where most students have private instrumental and composition lessons. We reflect on the benefits of using facilitation as a form of leadership and include the perspective of Ricardo Breim, principal of Espaço Musical, who gave us feedback following the project. We focus on four aspects of the project, beginning with a summary of the background and the artists involved. This is followed by an outline of our creative approach with an emphasis on how we embrace collective creativity within a formal, educational context. Further, we reflect on the intensity of intercultural relationships and consider the social challenges and intricacies present in a project such as this. The chapter concludes with a discussion concerning the value of cultural exchange and how this can inform our professional development.

Project background: Creative Voices 2012

Creative Voices was a musical and cultural exchange between Soundcastle and Espaço Musical. Devised and managed by Brazilian musician Fernando Machado, the vision was to explore creativity and collaboration in educational settings, allowing musicians and educators to share skills, ideas and artistic voices from differing cultural perspectives.

We, as Soundcastle, specialize in creating new music through collaboration in a diverse range of contexts. As professional performers and leaders we work in settings such as community centres, schools, care homes and conservatoires, with people of all

ages, backgrounds and musical abilities, as well as professional musicians and artists. Through facilitating collective music-making we aim to devise original work which reflects the creative voices of the people and the place we are working with.

Espaço Musical is a prominent music school in São Paulo, founded and directed by Ricardo Breim. The school is renowned for promoting music as a language and communication skill. Espaço Musical focuses on learning and teaching musical perception, in which learning by ear plays an important role, developing the significance and depth of the musical experience. This approach to education raises all-round musical awareness, using improvisation, composition and analysis to support performance and technique. Ricardo Breim was instrumental in writing the National Curriculum Parameters for Music (BRASIL, 1997) and was also involved in preparing the first National Examination of Students' Performance (ENADE¹). He currently directs the Formation of Musical Educators (FME) course at Espaço Musical.

Fernando Machado is an independent musician and workshop leader from São Paulo, currently based in London. Under the name Lambrego² he produces, performs and records original music, taking his Brazilian influences to a wide range of contexts. In the field of education Fernando works alongside schools and community arts centres to develop creative musical work with people from differing backgrounds, promoting exchange across art forms and cultures.

In bringing together Soundcastle and Espaço Musical, Creative Voices sought to allow both parties to discover and learn from similarities and differences in their approaches, as well as to develop an awareness of their respective cultural and educational backgrounds. In terms of education, there is a large degree of separation in Brazil between the formal study of music in institutions and conservatoires, which focuses on classical and jazz genres, and the informal learning of traditional and popular styles. The legal requirement to include music in school-level education has only recently come into force in Brazil and as yet São Paulo has no system or curriculum for its implementation. However, music is embedded in the culture and informal learning can be found in all walks of life, embodying the well-loved sounds of samba and MPB (*Musica Popular Brasileira*). The idea of workshop leading is fairly new and currently associated with the informal sector. From this perspective, the direction of our music education practice in London holds particular interest. Our music-making can encompass any genre, combining influences from and functioning in both formal and informal settings. The appeal of the exchange from our side is in the immersion in a culture that is inseparable from its musical identity and the exposure to the unique educational approach of Espaço Musical in this context.

Creative Voices 2012 was hosted by Espaço Musical for six days in January, and was open to staff and students at the school embracing all ages, backgrounds and musical abilities. Culminating in a performance of newly created work, the week ran in three strands, each with a different cultural and educational focus:

1. Anglo Voices

Over five morning sessions, Soundcastle worked with Espaço Musical students enrolled on both instrumental and music education courses.

With the overriding aim of creating new music we used models of

leadership and facilitation to explore and demonstrate approaches to spontaneous music-making and group composition.

2. Brazilian Voices

Afternoon workshops were led by Brazilian artists: Barbatuques (body percussion), Babado de Chita (traditional dance) and Ari Colares (percussion). Here we took on the role of participants and learnt about Brazilian musical traditions alongside staff and students at Espaço Musical.

3. Anglo-Brazilian Voices

During two intense creative sessions, we worked collaboratively with Espaço Musical staff. With a dual intention of devising new music and exchanging professional and artistic practice, we worked on methods of group composition and improvisation. We also held an evening discussion, which included presentations by Soundcastle and Ricardo Breim, sharing our knowledge and experience in order to develop ideas on promoting music in the community and education.

Embracing the collective

In order to lead cross-cultural workshops in Espaço Musical, we focused on collaborative composition within what is usually a more segregated educational context for individual learning. The participants were of varying ages, abilities and levels of instrumental skill. The aim was to bridge the gaps that formalized learning can inadvertently create (such as different groups for musical ability, age, instrument and musical genre) whilst simultaneously utilizing the formal, school setting to monitor the responses of all participants and encourage progression of each student's abilities. We wanted to facilitate an environment of equality, widening the students' outlook so that all felt confident to contribute. In order to achieve this, our strategy for Espaço Musical was a combination of leading, facilitating and co-leading. The following will present some brief examples of what each style of leadership entailed.

Leading

We started with a strong sense of a single leader in order to create a settled, calm environment. On the first three mornings, we began with one of us leading call-and-response singing. No verbal instructions were given once we were in the workshop space. A safe environment was created by having a clear leader and no language barrier to overcome, while simultaneously establishing group ownership of the workspace by filling it with our combined voices.

We retained a leading role for the first day during the workshop activities. However within this, we immediately encouraged the Brazilian students to take part in leading and decision-making. We were keen for participants to discover their own artistic energy; as Ken Robinson writes 'when we connect with our own energy, we are more open to the energy of other people.' Focusing on improvisation and listening exercises,

the aim was to start searching for a group sound. Using hand signals to request riffs, melodies, counter melodies and dynamics, participants took turns in leading the group in structured improvisations. This enabled them to experiment with constructing a piece of music or contributing their own musical voice to the ensemble sound whilst simultaneously hearing the unique musical styles of other individuals within the group. The result was a collective subconscious awareness of the group dynamic, without the need for verbal communication.

It should be emphasized that we are careful not to use specialist language. For example, the word *improvise* was never used in the above activity. We focused instead on the idea of *play* and the impossibility of being wrong (an area to be explored more later). Following the workshop, some of our participants realized they had in fact been improvising and were surprised at their own contributions. Words such as *improvise*, *compose* and *perform* may carry a weight of expectation and potential failure; for instance the idea of improvising in a formal context can be intimidating. However, when interacting playfully in a supportive and safe environment where every contribution is valid, there is nothing to hold creativity back.

Facilitating

Having established a group sound and energy, we made a distinct shift from leading to facilitating. In order to exchange our cultural and musical ideas with the Brazilians we gave no more instructions and acted solely to assist the composition process, taking equal roles within the collective. Our aim at this point was ‘to enable the participants to see, feel and understand the connections that are integral to the creative process.’ Creating and following through ideas together in this way, the students gained a sense of ownership over not only the material but the whole process as well. The informal method enabled them to take control over their own learning, whilst the formal educational environment allowed us as facilitators to adopt a structured approach, carefully monitoring each participant’s experience. Rather than composing alone or following a leader, creative energy is stimulated by the ideas of others and, in turn, the collective energy can inspire individuals to raise the bar on their own achievements. The comparison to composing alone was felt by several of the Brazilian participants:

The few experiences I have had previously in composition differ greatly with this one for its individual character and loneliness. The exchange of ideas provided by an experience as this was not only enriching for obtaining knowledge of music as well as self-knowledge (especially in my case, for my shyness) . . . It was amazing and gratifying to witness the contribution of each and every one, without exception, in favour of the collective, thanks to the motivation and the enabling environment provided by the instructors.³

Co-leading

Following the facilitating stage, the Brazilian students were sufficiently confident to contribute ideas and guide creative processes themselves. The next step was to facilitate

co-leadership, and we now actively supported participants in taking on leading roles. We encouraged students to bring their own songs, lead the daily vocal warm-ups and suggest or demonstrate ways to piece together the musical material. In the performance itself students had the opportunity to lead different sections such as melodic lines and simple dynamic developments, with some of them taking on the responsibility of opening the whole piece. At this stage effective facilitation was crucial so we were observing and guiding when needed to ensure that leadership was a combined effort, resulting in a balanced cross-cultural composition reflective of all involved.

In order for facilitation and co-leading to work, every person involved must be willing to relinquish their ego, including the facilitators themselves. One overly controlling ego in a group can isolate an individual, disrupting the dynamic and hampering the empowerment of others. As leaders we aim to ensure that our own egos do not inhibit creative processes, by avoiding a sense of controlling directorship in order to enjoy collaborative and (in this case) cross-cultural results. Following the project, Ricardo Breim commented, 'The collective creation activities are organized so that the differences in musical training and experience do not affect the symmetrical involvement of all students. In the final product, we all feel at the same time, performers, composers and improvisers.'⁴

Intercultural relationships

The nature of an intercultural exchange often means experiencing projects within an intensely condensed timeframe. In the case of Creative Voices 2012, this was six days. This intensity can advance the growth of strong relationships over a very short period of time as well as raise awareness of cultural differences in social relationships. However, it can also work negatively as a group of people under pressure can become overwhelmed or stressed as they spend an unusual amount of time together. We believe a creative approach is vital to the development of successful relationships. The foundation of our projects is to promote strong, trusting and supportive relationships between all members of the group. This is not only so that the participants feel safe to share ideas but also to encourage peer support which means that anyone struggling has many more avenues of help and encouragement. This is also helpful in mixed instrument projects where the leader does not necessarily have expertise in each instrument. In terms of building relationships, this approach prevents us as leaders from appearing separate or superior to the group. We mentioned earlier the idea of play and how within our workshops it is impossible to be wrong. Having always been advocates of this approach within our own field, it was enlightening to be recipients of it when we were out of our musical comfort zone. As part of the cultural exchange, we were introduced to traditional Brazilian dancing by the group Babado de Chita. Their leadership methods combined a gentle, warm, casual feeling with a highly positive, motivating approach. Feeling stiff and awkward compared to the fluid Brazilians, we were encouraged to follow our instincts and allow ourselves to play and explore. As a result, our fears of being judged were put aside and our bodies were freed up to experiment and push past boundaries of insecurity, feeling and expressing the rhythm of the music through movement and furthering our creative potential within the dance workshop. The session was clear evidence that our practice

often has more in common with dance and drama approaches than musical ones, as the Brazilian dancers led an informal, inclusive workshop with the clear message *there is no such thing as wrong*. There are pros and cons to this within a formal context, the latter being that you can never be sure of the final product or its suitability for a particular performance. However the pros include a greater sense of achievement for individuals within the collective, the development of relationships through collective creativity and the original and unpredictable artistic material which results. Whilst there are challenges in finding a balance between leading and facilitating, this approach opens up a world of opportunity to group collaborations and empowers individuals within the collective.

Overcoming the language barrier is the most immediate challenge for many intercultural relationships. Although this can be perceived as a problem it also provides an opportunity to make music become, as Breim commented after the project's conclusion, a '*sound language of integration*'.⁵ With varying degrees of familiarity with Brazilian Portuguese within the group we had to be prepared for situations in which we could not deliver or understand direct instruction. When leading, we encouraged groups to try out and demonstrate ideas rather than fall into endless discussions of what could be. The Espaço Musical philosophy made this an easy task. Students and teachers were already being trained in a different way to the usual classical instrumental approach which separates theory from practice. Their continual emphasis on learning through experience meant that the students were already used to exploring ideas through practising them rather than writing them down. An intercultural musical exchange occurred very naturally in this case, as we as leaders were not teaching any musical material and individuals followed their creative instincts when contributing. Breim noted:

as there is no prior commitment to specific musical language, the inclusion takes place also in terms of cultural differences: participants tend to propose compositional materials with which they are familiar and, as a rule, accept completely the cultural contributions that arise in the process, always taking care that the excesses or shortages do not compromise the quality of the musical result.⁶

As discussed earlier, we often use songs as a levelling device in a warm-up. These have been collected from different cultures all over the world and using simple words in a language that neither nationality is familiar with can put intercultural relationships on the same page. It became clear that the few English songs we used, though simple to us, were a little complicated for the Brazilian participants, making them nervous. Throughout the week we also experienced this in reverse when the Brazilian teachers we met moved quickly through Portuguese songs and we were unable to get a grip on the words. This gave us a new appreciation that the activity of singing together, which can be so unifying and confidence building, can also be destructive if an individual feels out of their depth. To lead and participate in workshops during the same week, although very intense, enabled us to constantly learn from and experiment with the new techniques and ideas we were observing.

We discovered that, in terms of social relationships, Britain can learn from Brazil, particularly in our attitude towards different age groups. Intergenerational practice in Espaço Musical was completely natural. All of the Creative Voices workshops had a range of participants, from age ten to people in their sixties, including some teenagers. The ease with which conversations were struck between participants of different ages and the genuine interest that people showed towards each other highlighted the lack of regular opportunity for this mixture in the UK. In Espaço Musical, it was particularly noticeable that the adults responded as equals to the young people involved. This may have to do with the fact that they were all students within a formal context, but as an overall cultural difference it was noticeable that many generations came together socially on a regular basis. The most joyous example of this was a carnival rehearsal at a local samba school. These energetic and carefree rehearsals are open to anyone and indeed everyone came, from grandmothers to toddlers and everyone in between, all joining together to sing the *samba-enredo* (the samba school's unique storyline for the carnival parade).

Professional development

Communication is currently the easiest it has ever been. We can speak to friends, colleagues and contacts in all corners of the globe without ever leaving our homes. Information is at its most accessible; Google will answer our musical queries in an instant and YouTube will bring us videos of music from around the world in seconds. So what is the value of active cultural exchange? Do we need to travel in order to truly understand the music of another culture or can we learn about it equally effectively online, saving money, energy and time?

One of the key themes of contemporary music leadership and creative music-making in the UK is learning by ear. It is common for creative projects to be delivered and received without any form of traditional notation. Also, the use of body percussion is becoming increasingly common, as is the singing of simple songs from other cultures. Being standard elements of our existing approach, these were all areas that we were keen to refresh and explore further, exchanging them with the Brazilian teachers and students and using them in formal working contexts. In order to develop a real understanding of the value of using ideas from other cultures there is no substitute for being in a country, surrounded by artists who have spent their lives absorbed in its music and culture.

To begin with, we developed many tangible, practical abilities from our exchange with the Brazilian artists. We learnt about and developed skills in body and vocal percussion, the clapping scale, Brazilian rhythms and songs and basic Brazilian dance. We have all integrated these skills into our work in the UK, both as freelance amateurs and under the Soundcastle banner. For example, we have been using the songs in our independent practice and also using ideas gained from the project as inspiration for activities in our current partnership with UK-based language school ELAC.⁷ It would be unrealistic to say that during our two weeks in São Paulo we learnt to play Brazilian music; this is, of course, a lifetime's work. However we did learn extensively from the style of leadership we experienced when collaborating with Brazilian musicians. The aim of our exchange was less about the content of

the workshops and more about observing and experiencing the leadership of artists who are immersed in different musical cultures. The structure of the Creative Voices exchange enabled us to demonstrate the advantages of an informal approach within a formal educational context, while in return the Brazilian artists, used to working in informal contexts, introduced us to new leadership techniques. In addition we were able to extend our musical outlook and creativity through learning traditional Brazilian rhythms and dance.

One of our primary goals is the development of intergenerational work to bridge the barrier of the age gap which is so pronounced in the UK and seemingly non-existent in Brazil. Throughout our time at Espaço Musical, it became clear that by fostering an atmosphere of listening and experimentation it is possible to build a dialogue that does not distinguish the creative voice by the age of the person. This observation was greatly encouraging for us, helping us to see how, within creative contexts and with thoughtful facilitation, different age groups can co-operate free from patronization or over-politeness.

The language barrier provided us with the perfect opportunity to explore Espaço Musical's philosophy of *musica com linguagem* ('music as language') within our own leadership practice. The latest Ofsted report makes a strong case for more music, less talk⁸ and this was a motto of our time in Brazil. Using the leading, facilitating and co-leading techniques described above, we challenged and extended our own non-verbal communication skills. This has directly influenced our creative and philosophical approach, stimulating us to think deeply about the method of facilitation as leadership and how we implement it in our work in the UK. Having gained this experience and honed our skills of facilitation we were well prepared for our community project *Musical Beacons*⁹ which ran in Bow and Charlton and had several social parallels with our Brazilian experiences. Participants had a wide range of musical ability and experience, and we explored the balance between leading them in the discovery of music and facilitating their ideas on how to make that music reflect their local community. Further, London's diverse cultural mix meant that many participants were also coping with the language barrier and non-verbal leading methods proved invaluable.

We aim to develop the sustainability of this exchange and are currently in conversation with Fernando Machado, our collaborator and project manager, about developing the project and returning to Espaço Musical and other interested Brazilian institutions. The evaluation feedback from the school, the participants and the team was exceptionally positive and the relationships formed and skills developed proved to us the immense value of cultural exchange to the practice of artists and facilitators.

Creative Voices 2012 taught us the benefits of practising facilitation as a form of leadership within a formal context and how it can widen the potential of cross-cultural exchange and communication. From our point of view, we were able not only to extend our practical leading skills but also to learn from Brazilian attitudes towards informal music-making, embracing groups of widely varying artistic ability and social background with high quality artistic results. Espaço Musical was able to observe and understand our implementation of informal, collaborative approaches, advancing the artistic potential of individuals within a formal educational context at a pivotal

time for the development of Brazil's music education system. The artistic content of the workshops, whilst it developed and extended our own musicality, was not the primary reason that it was vital to travel to Brazil rather than conduct the exchange via the internet. In terms of professional development, the core of this project was experiencing other cultural forms of leadership. By both leading workshops and experiencing them as participants, we were constantly learning and evolving our own skills. Experiencing leadership as opposed to simply observing it or reading about it is the key to a deeper understanding of its ongoing effect on participants. There is no better way to learn this than to be a participant. Overcoming the language barrier by embodying Espaço Musical's *musica com linguagem* motto ensured that a lucrative intercultural exchange such as Creative Voices mutually benefited both nationalities, equipping us with tangible skills, philosophies and attitudes to employ in our own work as well as international partnerships to ensure that the discussion is ongoing and always developing.

References

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Endnotes

- ¹ Exame Nacional de Desempenho dos Estudantes, <http://govbrasil.com/site-do-enade-www-inep-gov-br-enade/> (accessed August 2012)
- ² Lambreg, www.lambreg.blogspot.co.uk/ (accessed 22/07/2012)
- ³ Blevio Zanon (workshop participant) Feedback during the Creative Voices 2012 evaluation process.
- ⁴ Ricardo Breim: Reflective feedback following the Creative Voices project.
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- ⁷ ELAC (English Language and Activity Centres) www.elac.co.uk/ (accessed 22/07/2012)
- ⁸ www.slideshare.net/Ofstednews/music-in-schools-wider-still-and-wider, Slide 6, Bullet 4. (accessed 20/07/2012)
- ⁹ Musical Beacons: A Soundcastle community music project. For more information, visit http://soundcastle.co.uk/wordpress/?page_id=16 (accessed 22/07/2012)