

The Process and Production of the Composition of a Musical Drama with Elementary Students

Rhonda McRorie

Independent Scholar, Manitoba, Canada

My study attempted to identify, describe and compare components of the composing process of a musical drama. I worked with fourteen fifth and sixth grade students. This study was guided by a number of research foci: the value of writing a musical drama with students with respect to the creative process, an examination of the creative process itself and the processes involved in playwriting and song writing and the resulting synthesis.

The data of the research was the work with the students in all the stages of brainstorming, story-writing and song writing ideas and presentation. I reviewed and transcribed the videotapes of all the sessions. Myself and the students kept journals, recording what why and how things happened. After the production students were interviewed about their reaction to the process of writing a musical drama. Results of this exploratory study indicated the phases of the composing process can be described in both playwriting and song writing, using Wallas's model. Study results provided an initial attempt to describe composing behaviours and to make comparisons across the disciplines of drama and music.

Rap song clip: The students created a rap as their opening number to set the stage for who they are, where they are and what they need.

Prologue

As a music teacher in the schools for many years, having been exposed to a variety of teaching methods, approaches, curricula and much professional development, I applied these learnings toward my passion for the production of musical-dramas. I began composing songs at an early age for my own enjoyment which continued throughout my years of teaching music in the schools.

- My first musical was created in 1983 in Nevis, West Indies, while working with teachers, I along with the teachers, collaboratively wrote an original musical-drama, *The Dawn of a Dream*, which was presented for the Independence Celebrations when Nevis became independent from Britain.
- In 1987-1988, I worked with a friend and fellow teacher and a cast of adults from the community to present an original musical-drama, namely *Better Tomorrows*. This was a true story of a family from Rosenort Manitoba. The drama portrayed how God had carried them through a number of tragedies in their lives. I wrote and arranged the music.
- In 1990, as partial fulfillment of a Graduate Seminar in Music Education, I worked with grade five and six students to create the musical –drama *Wump World*. The students took an existing story, and designed the sets, wrote the songs and we performed it.
- As part of this thesis I composed a musical drama with ten and eleven year old students including the script, lyrics, and libretto; namely, *Christmas in our Neighborhood*” which is about streetkids at Christmas.

Research

In preparation for the research, I familiarized myself with the extensive literature on playwriting, song writing, musical-drama and the creative process. I will highlight some of them.

Among the foremost writers and researchers I found Myers and Kratus for song writing, Courtney and Maister-Gordon on playwriting, Bryce and Welburn have written about musical-drama and Gardner and Perkins are known for their work on creativity.

In 1958, the discussion in the research on creativity speaks of all children as creators. Geraldine Siks writes: "They paint, draw, speak, write, sing and dance with joyous abandonment. They create in an almost reckless way. They are crude and confident in the freshness. They are vital. They are expressive. This does mean that when a child makes his entrance into the world he comes with a gift of imagination, with the power to create, and a desire to express himself."

She goes on to say: "The great truth for both teachers and students to realize is this: a gift exists in each one of us, some sort of gift, but we must find it for ourselves.... The creative spirit is something more than a product in clay and canvas; it is a dancing, rhythmic, living, a laugh, a flash of the mind, strength of control, swiftness of actions, an unwritten poem, a song without words, it is life adding its invisible cells to more and more abundant life."

In 1963 many educators still believed that our changed environment should call for more training in creativity. Some even feared that much of our educational programs tended to stifle imagination. Osborne wrote: Children's imaginations need to be exercised "like the muscles, it must have exercise if the individual is to become a creative thinker".

Twenty years later Schafer (1986) describes creativity as "perhaps the most neglected subject in Western musical education."

By 1991, Campbell says that improvisation is seldom a part of the plan of instruction in school music programs. She says, "for all of its merits it rarely appears as a technique, process or result of musical experiences in elementary and secondary schools."

So, these researchers have asserted that the student can be trained to use more productively the talent which he/she innately possesses. The most direct way to develop creativity is by practising creativity, by actually thinking up solutions to specific problems and then giving the students opportunities to present their talents.

To exercise the imagination, I found it helpful to use Wallas's (1926) four stages which include preparation, incubation, illumination and verification.

In the beginning Preparation stage, the problem was investigated. The subject is assembling or receiving new ideas or gathering raw material from all directions. In my research project, during the initial brainstorming session, the students decided they wanted to learn about street kids. One example of preparation was the written exercise in which the students worked in pairs and chose a title for their story, described twelve moments in that story, and wrote down a descriptive word for the feeling at each moment.

- living on the street = sad
- remembering back = happy
- a man comes down the lane = frightened

In the second Incubation stage, you are not consciously thinking about the problem. Rather, a series of unconscious and involuntary mental events may take place during that period. Incubation often results in 'bright ideas'. Mental relaxation during the Incubation stage may include a certain amount of physical exercise.

Just before session thirteen, Rachale went home, found a big box and slept in it overnight in their basement. This helped prepare her character and created the right climate for the incubation of ideas. Rachale was the student who visualized much of what actually happened, how it happened, and where it happened.

In the third Illumination stage, the idea which has been in incubation becomes definitely related to a specific goal. It is the period during which a picture is first sketched. This stage can be described as a 'flash' of success. Osborne notes that a simple way to court illumination is to take a walk. Beethoven enjoyed taking long walks through the countryside to enjoy nature. Often, he would think up bits of music that he could use in his compositions and would stop to jot these down in a notebook.

Bachmann (2011) discovered: "When I would relax and I was my normal, average, Canadian Joe self, and did a song by letting it just happen, that it was so absolutely simple and so inane and so silly in a way, that that's what everybody liked the best."

The fourth stage Verification, Wallas sees this stage resembling the first stage, Preparation. This stage is normally fully conscious and the idea which was obtained in illumination must be elaborated and revised during the last stage.

Wallas contends, "In the daily stream of thought the four stages constantly overlap each other as we explore different problems." I would agree with the overlapping of the four stages and suggest that one returns frequently to the focus stage as cited by Levi's study.

Aspects of Creativity in Writing a Musical

The literature concerning creativity and the creative stages of thought, shows the complexity of the creative process involving the whole person. Creativity needs to be developed or exercised as muscles do. Using Wallas model of the four stages was important to the exploration of creativity that this thesis was focusing on. Other aspects of creativity include the role of the facilitator, the participants, strategies for playwriting and songwriting.

Role of the Facilitator

The role of the facilitator requires giving students greater freedom to become creative thinkers. Susan Barber (1995) says, "Real leadership as teachers sometimes means getting away from our instructors role. Ultimately, the more a person is able to think creatively, the more that individual will get from life."

According to Welburn (1971), the role of the teacher involves four qualities: enthusiasm, cooperation, skill, and stamina.

Feldhisen and Treffinger (1977) say, "it is necessary to create an atmosphere that is receptive to new ideas and students need to have ground rules about accepting ideas from each other.

Murray Schafer (1986) emphasizes that "in a class programmed for creativity, the teacher must plan for his own extinction."

Participants

In this research project I worked with fourteen grade 5 & 6 students from an elementary school. We had an eleven-week block including 21 sessions together. "The ideal number of a brainstorming group is about a dozen," says Osborne. He also notes that "women members of brainstorm sessions have consistently averaged more ideas than their male colleagues."

Brainstorming Technique

Two essential features of brainstorming sessions are that no idea is too ridiculous to put forward and that no evaluation of ideas is made during the session itself. Encouragement is an essential feature of group brainstorming. The wilder the better, quantity is wanted, combinations and improvements are sought, how ideas of others can be turned into better ideas or join ideas together.

Playwriting Strategies

I used Siks research on creative drama. Playwriting has a beginning, middle, and end and is used to create character, scenes, stories, or situations in such a way to make them seem real. The students began to create their story of the street children at Christmas - how lonely they felt and how they wished they could be in homes for Christmas.

In a personal interview with R. Murray Schafer, he suggested a Bible story as a framework on which to build the musical drama. He suggested that the students research and discuss characteristics of the story, explore the personality traits of the characters in the story, and incorporate these traits in their characterizations, improvisations, and dramatizations. Through the vehicle of creative dramatics, students can inject new life and vitality into an old, old story.

We used Nentwig's (1990) idea of how to construct a scenario by establishing the why, where, when, who and what:

- Theme or objective of your play – Why
- The setting of your play – Where and When may include the mood, tone and tension
- The characters in your play – Who, including the characters' names, roles, and brief descriptions
- The brief plot outline – What, a brief description of the beginning, middle, and end with a brief description of the conflict.

With elementary students, I found I was the facilitator while also completely involved in the process. We began each session with a warm-up drama exercise. The students had the freedom to write their own stories, their own songs, and create their own character. However, I needed to keep the process going. The students wrote their script in a group setting and I recorded their ideas via note-taking and video-taping.

Song writing Strategies

We need to value composition as a process during which students wrestle with solving musical problems (Kratus). To this end I have used the improvisation and composition methods of musician and composer Carl Orff in song writing work with students. Also, I familiarized myself with the song writing strategies of Myers (1961) and Len Udow (1990). Both songwriters use a 17-step process.

Christine's song, *Tough Living on the Street*, refers to "sleeping in the dark lanes, Frightened by every noise and move. You're lying there going insane, the noises and movement is driving you crazy.... not making a penny a day. It's practically deadly."

Fears, darkness, insanity, poverty, and loneliness all describe her feelings as a street kid. In her lyrics, she also refers to the need to be loved and taken care of: "You want someone to love and keep." It shows the need for security.

Conclusions

- The writing of a musical drama which was a synthesis or weaving together of the playwriting and song writing - the essence of creativity. Osborne says. "Most ideas are by way of combinations – so much so that synthesis is generally regarded as the essence of creativity." Musical theatre by its very essence is such a synthesis.
- The value of writing a musical-drama was confirmed in the positive response from the children to this experience. The project reinforced the need to exercise and develop creativity in the schools. As one of the participants said, "I'd do it a thousand times!"
- The writing of the musical-drama included so many learning opportunities including initiating the writing process, data collection, and discussion and guiding the students through the steps of improvisation, rehearsal, and staging the performance.
- The writing of the musical drama encouraged reflection by the students. It encouraged the young participants involved in this experience to look at their own lives and experiences and share this with others. Christine was able to express her feelings through her song, *Tough Living on the Street*. Jase learned how tough it is to live on the street and wrote a song to express "being there" for each other.
- Repeatedly through the years, when working with students, I have used the creative process to write plays to be performed on stage. It has become a way for students to explore their imaginations, feelings, and knowledge of themselves and others.
- The opportunity of a public performance served to increase the students' self-confidence and improve their self-esteem. Janet loved acting but, mid-way, was expressing fear of being on stage. Jennifer, who said she could not write a song, not only composed the song, *No Christmas Pies*, but also performed it as a solo.

The voices of children, literally and metaphorically, can be heard throughout these creative processes. We must not underestimate the children's abilities and "spoon feed"; rather, we must allow them to take the reins and the risks to assume ownership and make decisions cooperatively and collaboratively.

Finally, this project demonstrated that fostering creativity in song writing, play writing, and other creative learning experiences is extremely important. It is the key to a well- rounded music education for the students.

Here are a few quotes from an article in the local *Herald* by writer Wanda McConnell titled, *Concert Takes on Tough Issues*, which was published after our performance of *Christmas in our Neighborhood*. McConnell says: "Rhonda McRorie helped the young actors pull it all together. The young actors took their roles very seriously. The students said creating their own play was awesome. The students have decided to do what they can to help kids living on Winnipeg's streets by forwarding the silver collection to an agency that works with street kids."