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[Megarrity, David & Boyle, Bridget](#)
(2018)

Pennies falling: collaborative rewards in a state of creative emergency.
NJ: Drama Australia Journal, 42(1), pp. 14-25.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14452294.2018.1504364>

Pennies Falling: Collaborative rewards in a state of creative emergency

Theme: Learning environments

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ABSTRACT

In theatre, hierarchies that delineate role and function often obscure the collaborative work of conceptualising a performance. Similarly, group processes may mask hidden creative hierarchies by labelling themselves 'collaborative'. Either way, it is widely held that it's difficult to make things in groups.

Third Year BFA (Drama) students at the Queensland University Technology engage with creative development in building new performances to proof of concept stage.

'Then the penny dropped' is a colloquial English expression capturing the moment of realisation after a period of uncertainty. This is an investigation of learning experiences in which the penny is still *falling*.

This article surveys three years of this program in action, comprising 23 separate creative projects and groups. It describes the distinct characteristics of this learning environment, while developing a taxonomy of the student works, windows into processes that realised them and strategies for realising the learning opportunities offered by collaborative creativity.

KEYWORDS

Collaboration, creative development, devised theatre, creative development, capstone

Background to the research

Three streams of learning flow in Drama, in the Creative Industries Faculty of the Queensland University of Technology (QUT); Technical Production, Acting and Drama. Sandwiched between Technical Production and Acting – that provide specific vocational training - Drama's remit has been responsive to developments in potential graduate employment pathways in a complex and often resource-poor performing arts industry.

These pathways can best be described as leading to a protean, or portfolio career, woven from intertwining strands of arts-based, arts-related and non-arts employment. This practice requires a suite of skills that extend beyond the simple exigencies of craft. Whether these young artists are making new work with their graduate peers, developing strategic relationships to attract funding or negotiating multiple projects and production teams simultaneously with their day-jobs, a sensitivity to group contexts and an ability to collaborate are vital.

While Helen Keller tells us that 'alone we can do so little; together we can do so much', Jean-Paul Sartre uses the mouthpiece of a character to tell us that 'hell is other people'. Both points of view may hold, even in a single afternoon of trying to collaboratively devise a new performance.

In the contemporary performing arts, traditional roles and hierarchies can flex, bend or break under the pressure of peer-to-peer dynamics and pragmatic processes of production and presentation. Here, the skills of young artists are tested across boundaries. Here, the play 'text' that is the starting-point of traditional theatre may be the last thing to arrive. When so much is unknown, and yet to be invented, a state of creative emergency is born.

These complex factors have required innovation in course and unit design. Across the three year degree among other units focussed on skills or theory, students track a trajectory of practice-led learning across a range of performance experiences. This includes a scripted work in the realist genre with an industry director (first year) and a show collaboratively devised with the assistance of a specialist (second year). In their third year, Drama students creatively develop and present a work in progress of their performance concept which is then most often realised as their final year

production. The final effect is a rich, risky mini-festival of original performance works across a broad range of genres and styles. Each year, some of these pieces (and indeed many of the collaborations that brought them into being) go on to be performed after graduation.

This research looks closely at three years of learning and teaching in one of these production units. Placed at the beginning of their third and final year, Production 3 is focussed on collaborative creative development, culminating in a work in progress presentation of their performance concept.

Methodology

To survey the concurrent and emergent learning activities in this site of research, constituted by three semesters of creative practice (2012-15) by three separate cohorts of third year Drama students, Case Study was the most apposite research methodology. Each creative group and its time and task limited life formed a discrete unit for examination. Each annual cohort represented 'groups of groups' engaged with differing approaches to the central creative task, and over three years of this project's scope could be viewed as a 'group of groups of groups' with the potential to induce overarching themes or theories we could employ to improve teaching and learning of creative practice in the university setting. Jean Hartley tells us that

Case study research consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context. The aim is to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied. The phenomenon is not isolated from its context... but is of interest precisely because the aim is to understand how behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context. (Hartley in Cassell and Symons Chapter 26)

Therefore a range of data collection strategies was employed. Qualitative data included ongoing file notes collected by teaching staff, tracking developments in each group project carefully. This data mass was then distilled into a matrix built around observations on culture and structure of each group-as-a-whole (Ephross and Vassil 2005, 39) observations on process and product focussed on critical incidents, the nature of proposed work, assessment comments and grade.

Written feedback was collected from students, derived both from the university's formal feedback procedures, and from a more detailed anonymous online survey designed by the research team, focussed on the location of "critical incidents" in multiple creative processes. We as the researchers (as well as the students themselves) were guided by John Flanagan's classic description of a critical incident as

any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. (in Jasper 2015, 13)

The researchers composed questions around the central challenges of collaborative creative practice, using accessible common-sense language, the main questions being

- *What single thing did the teaching staff do (or give you) in this unit that helped you the most to achieve the task?*
- *What single thing did you or your peers in this unit do that helped you the most to achieve the task?*
- *What was the single least helpful element of this entire process?*

Data from all sources was de-identified or anonymous. Quantitative data included the size of groups, as well as records of student achievement expressed through formal grades, calculated via a cross-marked and moderated process of criterion-referenced assessment via standard schemas. Assessment Criteria were focussed on the development of a collaborative performance to proof of concept stage; the generation and communication of a methodology for creative development with reference to appropriate literary, social, historical and critical material relevant to the preparation of a collaborative performance. In this way a criticality is brought to craft, introducing the potential entwinement of theory and theatre through performance praxis.

What is creative development?

Creative development refers to a mode of creative practice, consciously entered into and aimed at making something that won't be completely finished.

Anecdotally, it was championed to arts funding bodies as a separate category of creativity for funding purposes by the puppeteer community, an artistic practice where there's clearly a middle stage required between conceptualisation and realisation – a phase in which acts of experimentation and exploration of materials and tools is required.

Creative development stands alongside (rather than in opposition to) what might be termed 'traditional' theatre processes, which are often led by an extant script in a hierarchy where roles, actions and outcomes are all relatively pre-determined. Creative development always needs to strike a balance between what is *pre-determined*, and what may be *discovered*. It involves problem-finding, as well as problem-solving. It embraces devised theatre practice in which

the content, form and structure are determined as the process unfolds. The performance text is, to put it simply, 'written' not before but as a consequence of the process. Devising processes tend to reflect the particular places, spaces and people involved and the immediate contexts of the work tend to be woven into the performance. The compositional challenge is therefore to define and shape the material from the living process and from the dialogue between the people involved. (Turner & Behrndt 2016,170)

Bound up in this idea is a mixture of known and unknowns. Artists may know that they want to combine two art forms in a particular way, but need to experiment with how it might be done. It may require artists to attend to process as carefully the product. In creative development there is room for innovation, experimentation and new possibilities, happy accidents and surprises. There is also research, planning, execution, evaluation and reiteration.

Creative development may result in 'performance' (as in a new show) but other things may be developed along the way, such as new ways of converging different artforms, new ways of generating material, or forging new connections in an

ensemble as they negotiate the material. The benefits of these discoveries can therefore, extend beyond the immediate aims of the new work being created.

In Production 3, third year students collaborate to create the foundations of new works: often these are devised by groups of students who may not have worked together before, in creative combinations that aren't always 'led' by one artform or artist. The parameters are few and mostly pragmatic in nature, pertaining to time, group size, performance space, technical and budget limitations. The creative outcome must be original, but may be an adaptation of, or "after" existent text/s, although the students rarely take this option. Whatever 'way in' they select, this means that the creative tasks (and by extension, the teaching and learning) are emergent, thus tending to anticipate independent creative practice in the mode of contemporary performance. Keith Sawyer (1999, 12) points out that "[b]ecause group creativity is emergent, the direction the group will travel is difficult to predict in advance." This implies that a "creative group is a *complex dynamical system*, with a high degree of sensitivity to initial conditions and rapidly expanding combinatorial possibilities from moment to moment" (in Miell et al 2005, 49).

If there was one way of collaboratively devising theatre, then we would teach it. The resistance of this practice to singular definitions entails an inherent plurality, meaning that the field is defined by "processes of experimentation and sets of creative strategies – rather than a single methodology" (Govan 2007:7)

What do they do in the unit?: designing the learning environment

In recognition of the challenges presented by creative collaboration, the unit has been carefully designed to encourage connections between young artists and ideology, creators and creative practice, and most importantly between the young artists themselves. This kind of work is challenging because it's inherently intersubjective.

The learning design of the unit is practice-led, and balances individual and group assessment. It blends lectures, workshops, studio practice and basic production outcomes. While supported, the learning is inherently heuristic, placing the students in a space of productive ambiguity. In second year, the students are taught generic principles of collaboration, are re-introduced to critical literacy and asked to reflect on their practice in these terms, so they are familiar with the basic terrain of collaborative learning. One student observed the high "level of emphasis placed on collaboration and good practice" in the unit. The advantage groups have over individuals in problem-solving is no longer anecdotal, and the risks and rewards of this approach are made very clear to the students. Michael Schrage sums up the common connections made between collaboration and innovation as he observes that

Collaboration is the process of *shared creation*: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could come to on their own... Real innovation comes from this social matrix." (1995, 33)

Early in the unit, students are individually asked to audit their background, skills, interests and passions as artists, and engage with critical theory in the creation of a written Manifesto clarifying what drives them as artists and capturing their approach to making performance. This is the first of their two assessment items. Having been exposed to fragments of the great, mad panoply of artistic manifestos, this task demands a connection between ideology and artistic practice as they position and interrogate their own practice. The Manifesto is a key element of group formation as they use the document to compare and seek identity with others interested in exploring similar territory in facilitated, whole-group workshops. Beyond the support offered by staff and planned activities designed to surface and activate their

aesthetic approaches, the onus is on the students to form groups of around eight members, a process which is understandably quite difficult for them. An awareness of the need to form groups based in common interests emerged as a theme in the data, with one student commenting that

the group selection process (was) extremely stressful for those who were not greatly integrated into the cohort. This left a fractured creative process as we collaborated out of survival rather than mutual interest/passion for a certain form of theatre.

Students have often reported that a session of 'ideological speed-dating' built into the workshop program in which they rapidly share and compare their manifestos with their peers in a large group context is a key element of this process. The realities of student life may mean that groups are formed around the pragmatics of availability as well. They then have 30 hours of scheduled contact time to explore, derive and devise a concept for a performance. Roles such as director, writer, or performer, are not prescribed or required, though they may be proposed. This learning is independent, though supported by staff who regularly respond to the needs of the group and project as they emerge, ensure the completion of key tasks, and offer provocations to encourage a deeper and more thorough approach to the creative task.

This culminates in presentations to peers at the end of semester as a 'work-in-progress' focussed on process *and* product. This assessment task is essentially a conceptually rigorous description of the rationale and nature of their proposed work, which includes some performance elements. As well as anticipating what the final product might be like, the work in progress exposes the foundations, structures and proposed development process. It is not a 'pitch' in the bald sense of the word: there's an expectation of more substance than style. It is not a dragon's den either, with the teaching staff deliberately silenced during proceedings. The emphasis is on peer to peer exchange.

There are some tensions in this learning environment as to how 'scaffolded' the learning should be: what exemplars of practice to present, and to what degree the students should service or disturb mainstream expectations of creative practice. This reflects a more general dissonance around creative practice in the academy, where

iterative notions of success and failure ubiquitous in the discourse around innovation and entrepreneurship seem at odds with academic 'success' - no student wants to 'fail early, fail often' *academically*. Unless the creative activity is carefully framed, the deep learning gained from an artistic failure may be discounted in favour of a simple numeric ranking. At the same time, striving for academic achievement may short-circuit, or prevent true collaboration, and therefore be a self-defeating strategy. Mia Perry is not alone when observing that "the nature of devising includes inherent contradictions with the nature of conventional educational systems" (2011, 71). The university experience also mitigates against innovation and truly free-range creativity. As Hennessey observes, "we have identified five sure-fire killers of intrinsic motivation and creativity: expected reward, expected evaluation, surveillance, time limits, and competition" (in Paulus and Nijstad 2003:183). Clearly all of these factors are at play in a group assessment piece set by a tertiary institution.

This apparent opposition enriched the site of this research. Trends and tendencies observable across 3 years of this unit offer the potential for taxonomy, not only of creative collaborations and the behaviours they encompass, but of the works these behaviours produce.

What did they do, and what did we find?

In creative collaboration, initial conditions will influence the final product. The point of departure is significant a factor as the destination so therefore the 'ways in' to the project are important. While divisions between content and form, for instance, can be considered blurry and arguable in a completed creative work (and there is certainly rich flow between the two domains in a process) a group must start somewhere. Without being pointed in any particular direction, all sorts of options were floated, tested, discarded or pursued, by independently formed student groups. However over the three years this research project observed, trends emerged in terms of the entry points to the group creative process.

The dominant initial approaches were through content (50%) that is, the idea or story being explored; followed by form (25%) such as physical or visual theatre. The remainder chose to enter the task through a particular process; to begin with a

hypotext (with a process of adaptation, response and transformation that could take in both content and form) and finally to take a design approach.

Types of works created

Most performances were new works of an anticipated thirty minutes duration, created and performed by teams of between five and nine; the products of quite varied collaborative processes. However, some trends were also observable across the three years of activity in terms of the 'flavour' of the works. Sometimes genre proved to be a useful way to get a handle on the task for the groups, though there were essential playwriting challenges for young writer/devisers in translating the complex tropes of the comedy or thriller, for example, to the stage in a completely new work. The decision to create a new musical, of which there were a few over the research period, also challenged its makers with the particular performance skill-set required to perform the work, heightening the gap between vision and realisation. At times the groups responded to contemporary theatre practice by emulating trends such as physical, visual theatre, or even puppetry.

Other groups made a decision to reject contemporary practice (and tacitly, the emphasis of the course they were about to complete) and veer towards the traditional. In this particular context, a choice to point a group process towards a traditional outcome could paradoxically be viewed as a 'radical' choice. At times the groups were adamant in wanting their work to eschew what they perceived as the inscrutable, high-concept tropes of contemporary performance practice in order to make something 'accessible'. This unit provided them with opportunities to pursue these enthusiasms.

Some groups immediately recognised and responded to the time and resource limitations of the project with a proposal which 'fit' its immediate context, at times with an ironic or deliberately 'daggy' (1) approach to staging in performance or design. These groups were at an advantage in terms of congruence between content and form. Other groups aimed for "higher" production values, at times with success, and at others revealing a gap between the intended spectacle and the evidence of the attempt.

These selected case study synopses are intended to create precise portraits of emergent processes from group formation through formation, development, to concept presentation. They draw on data gathered by teaching staff through progressive note-taking and reflective practice, group-identified critical incidents, assessment feedback and categorisation via Ephross and Vassil's four group-as-a-whole cultures. Emerging from a matrix of sorted data, they're best represented synoptically rather than schematically due to the fact that each group had its own story and different turning points, passed through at different, most usually unpredictable times.

They offer microcosms of rich creative teaching and learning which entwine craft-based and critical creative development processes which were essentially emergent. The final assessment presentation of their performance concept required a self-reported account of key features of their group's development process. The vast majority of these groups went on to stage these concepts in the following semester.

An 8 member group, highly organised and integrative, entered through process, using various methods of divergent ideas sharing. Settling on a pen and ink drawing, created by a group member (of an empty bedroom with patterned wallpaper) as a key stimulus image was a critical incident. It saw a direction emerge in which content and narrative were developed in symbiosis with experiments around the formal and stylistic concerns of magic realism, illusion and puppetry in the exploration of lost children and dream states.

An 8 member group, unfocussed with labile tendencies found its way together through form: they gathered around a shared enthusiasm for cabaret. As they explored topic of interest, they realised they all worked in unsatisfying positions in the service industry and chose to make this the springboard for diving into the creation of content – songs and scenarios. Connection between the direct experience of the creators and proposed performance was intimate, and resulted in a comedy of recognition that played well to peers. The performative challenges of the cabaret form, however were a journey to come.

A 9 member group with unstable tendencies (which became two working subgroups) came in through content, a desire to explore the impact of social media. A decision to frame the emerging work as Theatre for Young Audiences was critical as it assisted in narrowing the content base focussing the formal exploration on a kind of heightened naturalism, set at a slumber party in a Wi-Fi black spot. Some compelling images were created through this combination but the group felt safer in presenting themes rather than their manifestation as potential performance.

A 5 member group, in some way formed from the 'leftovers' of people not chosen by other groups rose above inauspicious beginnings, became integrative and was keen on exploring concepts of freedom and control for their thematic content. A critical decision to use the theatrical conventions of absurdism saw a diligent referencing of canonical Absurdist hypotexts in the collaborative devising of a new work, with direct adaptation of stylistic and formal properties servicing the development of a narrative. Here both critical and craft theory informed the project pitch, and a studious response to set task and direct response to robust tutor feedback resulted in a surprisingly masterful and tightly focussed performance concept.

Different 'ways in'

Some (but not all) high achieving groups tended to find a 'way in' through content, then experimented with, and developed a *congruence* of content and form. They engaged productively with theory (critical or craft), drawing on the experience of others to inform their work. Assessment criteria obliged them to do so, and therefore it is bound to emerge from the research as a critical success factor in terms of grades achieved. However, there's a distinct quality of theoretical engagement that informs and integrates with creative practice, beyond a simple namechecking. As Mark Fortier observes, "theory can be applied to theatre, but in the other direction, theatre speaks back to theory" (2005, 5).

'Speaking back' also characterises another critical success factor in this group task, which is the seeking out of, absorption of, and response to feedback, from peers or staff. This is not to imply that a blind obedience (especially to staff) is the ticket to a high grade, but rather a robust exchange based in clear and mutually understood goals, initially based in the set task, but informed by the emerging needs of the artwork being created.

Group size

There was no broad correlation between group size and academic achievement. The prescribed range was 6-8, and most were of this number, yet in actuality the smallest group was 5 and the largest 9. To 'force' the non-conforming groups into shedding or gaining members would have run counter to the processes of aesthetic and ideological alignment that formed them. Issues of academic equity also compel subject convenors to ensure groups are of roughly similar size. There is a substantive difference between the kind of collaborative work possible in a group of 5

and that which may occur in a group of 9, and data analysis revealed a slightly lower level of achievement in the few groups of 9.

There was an interesting recurrence of reflexive projects which, knowingly or unknowingly, brought an element of process to the product – ‘a play about a group trying to make a play’, or a ‘performance about a performance that falls apart’, pointing to properties of the process pushing into product.

Metacognition: integrating theories of collaborative creativity

Features of group work and collaboration are dotted though production work across the Drama course and this is reiterated in the content-base for this particular unit. It is made clear that collaboration is characterised by complementarity, tension and emergence (Miell and Littleton, 2004, 12) and that creativity invokes both convergent and divergent processes. The group develops after its formation and as it works towards agreed solutions it may qualitatively change, and acquire its own identity. This phenomenon is known as the group-as-a-whole. The students are briefly exposed to Ephross and Vassil’s four types of group culture - labile, unstable, constrictive and integrative (2005, 39). Speaking about the potential for a group to become a democratic microcosm is one thing in theory, but an entirely different matter when you’re in the middle of one. Both theoretical and practical perspectives are required for authentic learning when it comes to creative development.

The groups self-identified a range of behaviours conducive to collaborative creativity and positive outcomes, which align with *integrative* group cultures, whose central governing features are summarised by Ephross and Vassil as “a resonating admixture of the group’s basic urges of work and emotions, based on reality, mutual respect, and clear goals” (2005, 40).

These included ‘sharing ideas before the groups formed’, the creation of a ‘safe space in which to contribute without fear and play freely’, ‘engaging with emotional intelligence’, and supporting the ‘development of each other’s ideas’.

Recognising the broader patterns of the unit, in which many groups were tunnelling away at their own challenges, one student suggested an extension of this strategy:

although I found a great many groups were doing their best to keep everything they were doing a secret so as to 'surprise us', I believe in a collaborative process, subdivided into a series (of) smaller collaborative processes communication and feedback between groups is advisable... collective knowledge is more useful than an individual group's knowledge.

Part of the data analysis involved classifying the groups according to Ephross and Vassil's four categories, and not surprisingly it became clear that high achievement often coincided with an integrative group culture. This was not an exclusive connection. It is possible to succeed in a constrictive group culture, but it is much harder to do so.

Other strategies for an emergency management plan

We conclude that in addition to a focus on teaching and assessment of general principles of collaboration and group work in terms of their application to creative processes encourages metacognition and ongoing development of generic group skills, that teaching staff have a very significant role to play in the early stages of a group's work. Images of growth and nurture cluster around this nascence - "[I]like a farmer with a new crop, staff members need to foster the growth of what is at first a relatively fragile entity" (Ephross and Vassil 2005, 50). This is not just about the passive distribution and receipt of water and fertiliser, but rather highlighting to the students that difficulty and growth are often connected in collaboration.

When a group does not go through a series of processes over time in order to accomplish its tasks, it is not behaving truly as a group... a developmental perspective is useful, because it prevents both staff and members from overreacting to particular events or a particular phenomena in the group (Ephross and Vassil 2005, 48)

Mobile, agile teaching staff that are responsive to the emerging needs of each group and their work, and holding back on the externally applied 'quick-fix' are a key part of this process. The balance of freedom and support facilitated creativity as groups negotiated their emergency.

We asked the students in the final set of observations (2015) to anonymously comment as to the single most helpful thing the teaching staff could do to help their groups achieve their task. These included

- 'Freedom to create, with positive feedback and input that encouraged but did not dictate the work that was being created', 'a balance of free reign and support', and tutors that 'connected us to potential sources of inspiration'
- 'The benefit of an outside eye to critique the work during the process'
- For tutors to 'be there for a period of time every week to talk to us about our ideas and question them so we ourselves knew where we were at', 'checking in and monitoring our progress during the sessions, it helped our development and extended out ideas through suggestions'

Conclusion

Virginie Magnat underlines the ubiquity of change in this kind of learning environment, pointing out that "as they cultivate their embodied creativity, experience the infinite resources of collaborative work, and learn to expect the unexpected, students might indeed be transformed in the process" (2005, 84). These transformations aren't always on the curriculum, nor are the day to day operations of the modern university always very conducive to individuals or groups meeting the challenge such changes entail.

For the penny to drop, it must first fall, and before that point there's a strong chance it's been flipped. Any fall from the known to the unknown, from the predetermined to the emergent can be both exhilarating and unsettling. When collaborative creativity is the focus, there are a range of things we can do as teachers and learners to ensure that nobody 'flips out', to increase the odds of academic and artistic success while maintaining the risk and opportunity of collaboration.

However, a level of working metacognition related to the generic skills, processes and developmental stages of collaboration is an important safety strategy. Ensuring that working groups of a reasonable size are formed meaningfully, on the basis of a shared ideology or 'enthusiasm of practice' (McWilliam et al, 2008), are then supported in their early stages by a responsive staff member to locate and address

their problem are critical success factors. A robust dramaturgical exchange, in which students can discuss and respond to the advice they're receiving is vital. This assistance should be based not only in extrinsic principles, but the qualities of the emerging artwork.

Enabling a multiplicity of 'ways in' to the aesthetic activity is also important, in addition to leaving the way open to change, modification or mutation through experimentation. If the aim of a new performance is to innovate or surprise its audience, then surely we must expect a level of unpredictability their path to creation. To endgame the outcome of a creative process is to devalue both process and product.

If there was a single 'emergency kit', which would prepare us for every eventuality, that somehow made collaborative creativity comfortable, easy and productive, then one would have to ask whether it would be worth the investment. Its very presence would defeat the purpose, and neuter the challenge of this kind of authentic learning.

Notes:

(1) "unfashionable, lacking grace...amusing, eccentric" an affectionate insult for someone who is, or is perceived to be, unfashionable, lacking self-consciousness about their appearance and/or with poor social skills yet affable and amusing. Also used to describe an amusing, quirky and likeable person (as in, "He's a bit of a dag") and is non-pejorative.

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