

Interdisciplinary process for collaborative artists: A proposed theoretical model

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide a detailed breakdown of an exploratory process that was developed to facilitate collaboration between artists of multiple disciplines. This process places a strong emphasis on collaborative engagement, communication, and play in order to foster an environment where interdisciplinary work is created organically and synchronously among collaborators. In order to test initial viability of this theoretical approach, 11 artists from varying backgrounds were asked to follow this collaborative model for a period of 8 months, during which an original work was to be developed, rehearsed, and performed. This paper will present the preliminary findings following this 8-month implementation, and will substantiate the original theoretical framework with practical implications and suggestions. The ideas put forth in this paper are exploratory in nature and are intended to be viewed as avenues for further investigation and creative inquiry.

practical implications of each stage, preliminary successes or failures, as well as any resulting modifications or developments. The motivation behind designing this approach to collaboration stemmed from a desire to facilitate the integrated and cohesive development of work among artists of all disciplines. Structurally, this process was largely inspired by the concept of “flocking”. This term, when applied in the context of dance and movement, describes a practice in which numerous people mimic one another’s gestures and move through space as an intuitive and collective mass without ever establishing a leader (Pomer, 2002). It is my hope that this process will encourage artists to venture away from traditional methods of creative development—even briefly—to explore the range of possibilities made available by a more integrated approach to concept and content generation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Collaboration, as defined by John-Steiner and Moran (2004), provides us with the ability to extend our understanding of creativity beyond the individual. This definition suggests that the act of collaborating holds much more significance than simply working alongside another person towards a common goal. Instead, collaboration becomes a vehicle through which disparate ideas, skills, and interests from multiple people are aggregated to produce a result that would be otherwise unachievable by one person alone.

In my continuously evolving practice as a musician, I have become particularly interested in this approach to collaboration and how it can be applied to the creation of live interdisciplinary performance. Moreover, I am interested in investigating how to facilitate this higher level of collaboration between artists spanning multiple disciplines. In the field of collaborative performance, there is an important distinction to be made between interdisciplinary performance and interdisciplinary process. On a fundamental level, the former refers to any type of staged event in which multiple artistic disciplines are simultaneously present, such as dance and live music, or theatre with video projection (Bryon, 2014). Interdisciplinary process, however, falls closer in line with John-Steiner and Moran’s (2004) definition of collaboration, and refers to an involved process that has the potential to not only deepen our sense of creativity beyond the individual, but also beyond the individual’s artistic medium or practice.

This paper will elaborate upon a recently devised model for interdisciplinary process in which collaborative engagement, communication, and play are fundamental components (Reid, 2015). Furthermore, this paper will document the findings and insights of the model’s trial implementation, including

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to better understand the practical implications of this theoretical process, I assembled a team of artists to participate in a creative trial. The group consisted of three musicians/composers, three dancers, a choreographer, a video designer, a lighting designer, a costume designer, and a scenic designer, making a total of 11 collaborators. Over the course of an 8-month period, we conceptualized, developed, rehearsed, and performed an entirely original interdisciplinary work while adhering to the parameters of this new collaborative model. No material was generated prior to our first meeting, and each participant was given one absolute requirement: to be present at regular meetings throughout the entire lifecycle of the project, regardless of their artistic discipline.

It has been suggested that embedding oneself as both a creative contributor and a researcher into a project has the potential to result in a deeper level of understanding and insight surrounding the social and personal practices of collaboration (John-Steiner and Moran, 2004). Similarly, I believe that being critically aware of the underlying process and thought structure in a creative work will greatly enhance a performer’s interpretation of it. I found that being present in a creative capacity as one of the three musicians/composers helped to establish a stronger sense of commitment and confidence from the team as they agreed to adopt this experimental approach.

My original outline for this interdisciplinary model cited collaborative engagement, communication, and play as components comprising the first stage in a three part process. However, following the initial implementation of this approach, I have come to realize that these components are integral not only to the first stage, but to the entire process.

The revised model still takes the form of a three part approach, which can be broken down into: i. foundation; ii. content generation; and iii. application. The first of these stages is crucial to the overall success of the project. By

establishing a strong collaborative foundation, the group will be able to progress through the remaining stages efficiently and effectively. Present throughout the entire process are the themes of collaborative engagement, communication, and play. These factors are integral for maintaining an environment in which collaborators feel comfortable enough to articulate ideas freely, take creative risks, and develop work spontaneously.

As detailed in the original documentation of this process, collaborative engagement refers to both the mental and physical engagement of the participants, and is fostered early on in the collaboration through a series of blue-sky and brainstorming sessions. The notion of communication is further broken down into “green light dialogue”, a practice adapted from a philosophical approach to mindful communication (Chapman, 2012); and “semantics”, in which a common language tool kit is established to facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge across multiple areas of expertise and artistic backgrounds. Play is introduced as a means of instilling a sense of sharing and trust among the group members, which research shows are two vital ingredients for a successful collaboration (John-Steiner, 2000).

III. FOUNDATION

The first stage of this process is time intensive, yet tremendously valuable. During this stage, the collaborative and conceptual foundation for the later work is established. A further goal for this stage is to dissolve boundaries between the various artistic disciplines as much as possible, and to establish a sense of trust among the collaborators.

A.Blue-Sky and Brainstorming

At the very beginning of this process, all collaborators come together for a series of blue-sky sessions. These initial sessions are kept exclusively dialogue based, so that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and share ideas before any media is introduced. By restricting the group to verbal discussion as opposed to allowing visual assets, sound clips, or movement, everyone enters the collaboration on equal footing, and the value of communication is highlighted early on. A blue-sky approach is adopted for the initial sessions, in which all ideas, no matter how large, small, or complex, are encouraged and listened to. After these initial sessions, the group’s focus transitions to brainstorming.

Although these two concepts are commonly assumed to be synonymous with one another, blue-sky is more appropriately used as a pre-cursor to brainstorming—an opportunity to let imaginations run wild and creative juices flow (Todd, 2007). Blue-sky means that you begin with every door wide open and a palette of limitless possibility before you. Instead of getting bogged down with concerns of logistics and feasibility at the beginning of a project, blue-sky encourages collaborators to jump in creatively and get inspired. Brainstorming is then the process by which all of these ideas become filtered and distilled for eventual application.

B.Discussion

In this context, discussion simply functions as an extension of brainstorming, but with specific prompts for a more focused dialogue. These prompts can be anything. However, it is useful to consider questions that may help the collaborators develop a personal relationship with the project in order to encourage a stronger sense of mental engagement. I prompted each participant to share two things with the group: something they have always wanted to try or experiment with, either on or off stage, and something that they feel artistically challenged or frightened by. By coupling this more personal prompt-based dialogue with the blue-sky mentality, I was hoping to encourage collaborators to open up on a more emotional level while also establishing a sense of confidence in the process of sharing and exchanging ideas. After the blue-sky and discussion sessions, there was a noticeable increase in emotional and cognitive investment from the team members toward the work they were developing.

C.Semantics

It is very important in this first stage to establish a common baseline for communication among the group members. Even simple words such as “texture” or “color” can mean very different things to a musician than they do to a scenic designer, and dialogue that is centered around media-specific language can easily lead to confusion or feelings of being left out. Given how large and diverse our team of artists was, it was challenging for us to find a semantic tool kit that worked well for everyone. The ultimate solution was a combination of teaching one another key words for each discipline, as well as making a concentrated effort to use more generic, colloquial language whenever possible.

D.Sharing and Discovery of Practice

Toward the end of this stage, each collaborator is given the opportunity to share an aspect of their art-making practice or discipline with the group members. This could take the form of an informal demonstration, a group exercise, or a game. The motivation behind this is simply to alleviate some of the mystery and barriers surrounding each collaborator’s respective métier. Something as simple as teaching everyone in the group how to hold a trumpet or offering a quick tutorial on basic lighting techniques is enough to instill a sense of understanding and connectedness between disciplines.

The most important consideration for this step is that the exchange of information must remain lighthearted and nonjudgmental. It is not important for people to acquire a certain amount of new skill or even to “do it right”. Rather than a traditional teacher–student interaction, this experience should function more as an invitation to discover and explore different art forms and practices, and an opportunity to gain knowledge of each other’s craft through discovery and playfulness. This approach helps to create a sense of unity and cohesion, allowing each collaborator to become familiar with each other’s discipline in order to begin to notice the inherent similarities between them.

The foundation stage can last anywhere from 4–12 weeks, depending on the number of collaborators, the project scope, and the overall timeframe. It may be tempting to skim through this stage in order to jump into content generation, but it is

important to resist the urge to do so. As we progressed through this stage, our group discussions naturally began to focus themselves toward a common set of interests and an underlying concept for the piece began to emerge.

IV. CONTENT GENERATION

The second stage of this approach is dedicated to content generation. By this point in the process a collaborative foundation has been established, and the group has arrived at a concept or set of ideas that they find mutually inspiring.

A.Improvisation

The original collaborative model proposed that the primary method for content generation would be a series of improvisation sessions. Improvisation has been said to give collaborators the opportunity to begin working on an even playing field (De Spain, 2014), and to instill a sense of liberation as well as creative freedom (Rodosthenous, 2012). In our process, each improvisation session would be recorded and subsequently reviewed by the group. Upon reviewing the footage, collaborators are asked to look for moments or events that resonate with them or jump out as being particularly interesting. This process is very open ended and subjective: decisions can be made based on aesthetic, personal, or intellectual reasoning. Participants are not confined to commenting on their own contributions to the improvisation, but are encouraged to consider the entire group.

In practice, this method was an interesting ice breaker, and worked well as a transition out of pure discussion. However, it quickly became evident that not all of the collaborators shared the same comfort level or experience with improvisation. Certain individuals tended to dominate these sessions while others would default to a following or reactive role, ultimately leading to an imbalance between the collaborators and their contributions. Much like language and discussion, group improvisation is a method of communication that has an internal structure and vocabulary (Steinman, 1986). While this is certainly a set of tools that can be learned and developed, it is not something that everyone inherently shares.

B.Games

An unexpected change of course occurred when it became evident that improvisation was not working for everyone in the way that I had anticipated it would. In lieu of improvisation, we tried using a series of simple games and playful exercises as a means of initial content generation. Some of these games were introduced by group members during the foundation stage of this process, and others were invented on the spot as a need or curiosity arose. It is particularly interesting to note that many of the games we played were, in fact, largely improvisation-based. However, they did not seem to result in the same imbalance of participation as the straight improvisation sessions did. Perhaps the slight presence of rules and structure was enough to get people to stop thinking and to simply focus on playing. (Spolin, 1999). Of all the games we came up with, the

following three had the most positive impact, both in terms of content generation and overall group morale.

1) *What is it?* In this game, one or two people act as the subject. Their task is to listen to a series of open-ended questions posed by the rest of the group and to respond to them—physically, musically, or visually—without answering verbally. The job of the group is to carefully watch and listen to the subjects and to ask questions that might help reveal what the subject is or isn't. The question asking process is entirely personal, and can include questions such as “is it weightless?”, “is it rigid?”, “is it stubborn?”, and so on. This game was enjoyed so much by the group that it ended up being directly imported into one of the sections of the final piece.

2) *Move Together, Still Together.* Variations on this simple game can be frequently found in theatre and dance contexts. The goal is to intuitively find moments of collective motion and stillness without providing verbal directions or obvious gestural cues. Everyone begins by slowly walking around the room, taking note of their presence in the space and the objects and bodies that surround them. Each participant focuses on trying to stop and start their movement at the exact same time as everyone else in the room. Much like the concept of flocking, the goal of this exercise is to make it imperceptible even to the collaborators themselves who is initiating the starting and stopping of movement. This game challenges everyone to extend their awareness of their surroundings and of their bodies in space, and to try to become as in tune with their fellow group members as possible. Although this is traditionally a movement-based game, we had very interesting results exploring it with sound and visuals as well.

3) *Alternative Uses.* This began as a very playful exercise and ended up being a tremendous tool to help broaden individual comfort zones, break performative habits and defaults, and discover unique ways of integrating movement, sound, and physical space. The exercise is simply to challenge yourself to interact with the the space, the objects within it, each other, and your own bodies in ways that are new and unfamiliar. Examples of this could include using musical instruments to produce movement instead of sound; using the underside of a marimba as an entryway onto the stage; or programming light and projector cues as a means of composing music for sound of fans and motors.

As content began to be developed and larger sections started to take form, we did our best to assign each one a name that was inspired by how the content should feel, rather than what it should look or sound like. Once again, colloquial language was used as much as possible. Instead of describing a section as having rapid 16th note passages with strobe effect lighting, for example, it might be referred to as the “chaotic frenzy” section. The goal behind this was to avoid an accidental placement of hierarchy by giving everyone an

emotional/language-based launching point as opposed to one driven sound or lighting.

V. APPLICATION

For a full-length performance such as this one, the application stage begins approximately 5–6 months into the process. At this point, the collaborators break apart to rehearse and/or develop their individual portions of the project. A costume designer may require time to buy material or sew a costume, dancers may need time to memorize and rehearse their choreography, and so on. This does not replace group meetings and rehearsals, but rather serves to supplement them. It is natural for there to be somewhat of an overlap between the content generation and application stages, as material begins to be rehearsed and solidified.

Even though we allotted ourselves the time to rehearse independently of one another, the group still craved collective rehearsals. This is likely due, in part, to the fact that each individual's role relied on the presence of all of the other components in order to properly function, or to be properly implemented. It was very exciting to see how everything had become completely interwoven during the development stages as a result of having all the collaborators present throughout the entire process.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the practical implications and findings from the first implementation of a new model for interdisciplinary collaboration. The findings of this initial implementation led to a restructuring of the theoretical process to include collaborative engagement, communication, and play as underlying components throughout the entire process as opposed to solely in the first stage.

It was found that improvisation was not the ideal tool for content generation in this particular context due to varying degrees of experience and comfort among the collaborators. On the other hand, games and game-like exercises proved to be very useful both for creating material and for facilitating a cohesive and comfortable working environment. In the development of any interdisciplinary work, it is important to consider not only the difference between language used for each discipline, but also any differences in fundamental expectations and practices. The performing artists in the group were more immediately inclined to commit to a long term rehearsal schedule, whereas the designers were accustomed to a shorter and more intensive development period in the few weeks prior to the performance. These differences were by no means unsurpassable, however, and the overall experience was rewarding both personally and collaboratively.

VI. FUTURE WORK

This exploratory process is part of an evolving body of work surrounding creative collaboration and interdisciplinary art-making. Tremendous insight was gained throughout the eight-month period during which this process was applied, but there is still a lot more to learn. The use of games and playful exercises to generate content was an unexpected development which warrants further investigation, especially when

considered in tandem or opposition with improvisation. Future applications in varying artistic contexts and timeframes will provide a deeper understanding of the practical implications and full potential of this collaborative model.

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