



Sound, music and radio in the creative curriculum: perspectives on undergraduate study

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Abstract

The appreciation of the impact of sound in our lives and our learning is ignored in many undergraduate programmes. Whether focussing on sound as a different learning style, putting together a podcast as an alternative to written coursework or listening to radio broadcasts with a more critical ear, creative students need to recognize how sound plays a major part in the way we interpret the world and how we present ourselves. Embedding basic radio production skills and an appreciation of sound and music into a creative undergraduate curriculum can help access an individual student's own creativity for exploration and growth academically, personally and professionally.

The starting point!

Listening to the backgrounds and previous learning experiences of freshers each October, you could be forgiven for thinking that radio does not exist as a medium at all. For students having taken A Level Media Studies, most will not have had the chance to work with sound recording equipment or put together a sound podcast. Whilst most boards allow audio production as a medium for assessment, many Sixth Forms and Colleges do not offer this opportunity, often through limited resources. Video production appears to be the order of the day! To suggest that an appreciation of the nature of sound is covered by incorporating sound into a video piece does tend to sideline the power and

special impact of radio and using the sense of hearing and listening. Students taking performance, art and design courses as post-16 qualifications generally fare better in understanding how they can use music, in particular, to help them forge their own creative direction. They are usually introduced to music as a stimulus for creativity, which is then portrayed in a different medium through dance, drama or design-based artefact.

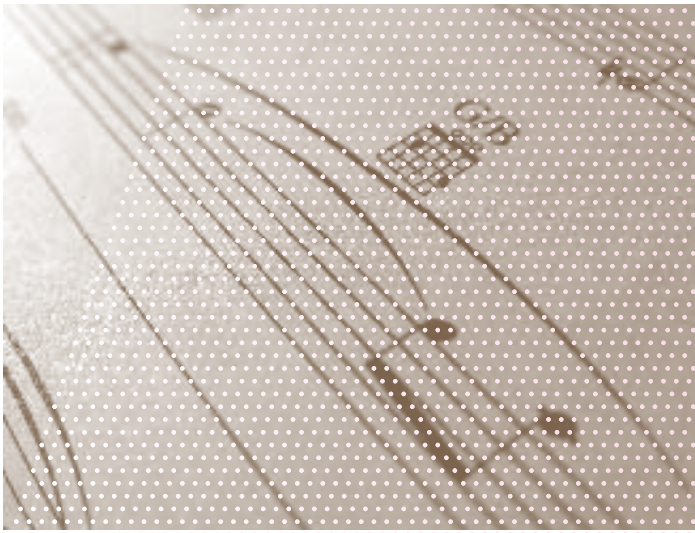
But it is a letter from a schoolgirl in Huddersfield written to a 'Children's Hour' radio producer nearly sixty years ago which pinpoints the real creative possibilities of sound. The girl wrote to the producer, Trevor Hill, after watching a television adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's childrens' classic 'The Secret Garden'. Hill had produced the work for radio a year earlier. In his book 'Over the Airwaves' (2005) he recounts that the girl had written 'whilst I am enjoying 'The Secret Garden' on television, I enjoyed it even more on radio because the scenery was better'.

It is the power of the sound medium which allows the stimulation and creation of individual mental images and the associated emotions which allows students to tap into and harness this capability and to assist in the development of their own creative faculties.

Getting students involved

The need for greater creativity in schools was highlighted in a report in 2007 from the Commons Education Committee. It stressed that creativity needed to be extended across, and embedded within, the whole curriculum. It also clearly stated that appropriate resource in all its forms had to be committed to this end.

Getting first year students in HE to tap into the wider range of their own creative faculties can often need a kick start. A reluctance for them to move>>



Students at the radio desk

Photo: Southampton Solent University

away from their tried and tested methods of idea generation and output towards a more structured approach like those suggested by de Bono (1990), van Gundy (1988) and others can mean a shift outside their comfort zone. But study and thinking at University is designed to push students' boundaries to try new approaches in a supportive environment and to become confident in tackling structured and unstructured problems and creative tasks in new and challenging ways.

Getting first year undergraduates to examine their world of sound by actually listening to what is going on around them (often for the first time) in the classroom, outside the building, in their own homes and even in a quiet room is an interesting learning experience for both tutor and student. Identifying and cutting through different layers, intensity, levels and positions of sound (or silence) and its movement is one thing. Thinking about how these sounds can change and transform our emotions is another. Hearing words being spoken professionally in a radio play or through poetry usually evokes a completely different response to the student simply reading them silently off the page. Asking students to identify and read a poem which has moved them can be problematic. Many will not identify a poem at all. But ask them to find lyrics from a song which has moved them and that is a totally different proposition. The words are readily found, eagerly dissected and the link with emotions easily voiced. It is the sound of the words, the aural context of the song and an identifiable, personal link which are important in accessing the students' analytical abilities.

Music in the non-musical curriculum

Music is a powerful tool. What types of music do students like? What does music do for them at a club or in their room? If music can change their emotions, maybe they can use music to change other people's emotions too. The usefulness in performance, art and design courses is clear but the relevance for taught courses to do with advertising, retailing, public relations and communication, for example, is also evident as these involve persuasion using a variety of senses. Students in this latter set of courses will typically produce considerable written and visual output but nothing or very little in sound. Students who are musicians at any level will readily testify to the effect of their musical creative outputs on themselves as individuals and how this impacts on their mood and other work.

Working with classical and contemporary music can help access students' creativity. Used either as a specific stimulus or background music to create 'mood' in a creative workshop students report a positive experience. The vast majority will have some sort of music running when they are working at home in a positive study environment. Replicating this in some way in the classroom can help produce a more motivated approach on the part of the student to the in-class group work or individual task.

Nina Jackson (2006) advocates the use of music in the secondary classroom for three main reasons. 'Listening to music in lessons helps pupils concentration and study skills ...[it] makes pupils feel happy, relaxed and ready for work....[and it] helps pupils achieve more'. My own experience in the undergraduate classroom, in a variety of settings, echoes these points. Students also report that there is a 'different' and 'positive' atmosphere in these seminars. Adding to the learning environment with music, they say, treats them as adults and allows them to interact as a group more effectively

in tackling a task as it reproduces an aural environment which they are used to when working at home. Current student favourites are albums by John Meyer (Continuum) and Jack Johnson (In Between Dreams). Naturally, this selection will change over time. Both CDs set a calming, acoustic, reflective background for student working and learning. For their seminar work, students can also bring in the CDs which 'work' for them and it exposes the rest of the group to other musical tastes.

Visualization

Another approach using sound, music and words as a focus is visualization. Generally it is students who have taken previous courses in art, design or performance who have come across this approach before. I call this technique 'guided daydreaming'. The approach involves using the imagination to create images, sounds, emotions and other sensations in the mind. By using music or sounds such as waves on the seashore or sounds of the countryside in the background, an atmosphere is created which can allow the student to let his or her mind legitimately wander during a set time during a seminar towards a desired and specified creative end. It could be imagining a picture, a walk across a beach, a meeting with a friend or a chance to ask themselves or someone else a particular question and to listen to the response. It helps reflection and allows the student 'time out' and space to permit and facilitate the creation and flow of creative ideas; to give voice to their imagination. Grace (2001) regards visualization as a potentially positive tool in a creative learning environment. She argues for its inclusion in the curriculum for student self-empowerment.

Closely linked is the concept of self-efficacy or the belief that we are able to bring about and sustain positive change in our lives. Student self efficacy relates to balancing academic work with the other demands, pressures...and temptations...of student life. By using music or natural sounds and a gentle verbal push in a particular direction students can begin to identify and set their own goals in various aspects of their life. They can focus on particular coursework briefs to mentally go through the various possibilities and take a critical position on their work and that of others.

Radio

Introducing radio production, recording and thinking in sound into the creative curriculum, even at a basic level, can help students to recognize the auditory learning style and to broaden their awareness of the requirements and capabilities of different media. A sonic narrative, for example, when a story is told as a linked and logical sequence of sounds with few words, is a challenge in which students are forced to think in auditory terms as opposed to the written word. Just as in the earlier example of 'The Secret Garden' students can create pictures in the listener's mind. Topics such as 'a day in the life of...' give scope for a range of sounds that can be integrated. 'A day in the life of a pound coin' demands the personification of the coin through a voice. How would the voice of the pound coin differ from that of a ten pence piece? Thinking creatively can lead to a greater critical awareness of sound in the wider environment and a general enhancement of creative thinking skills in different contexts.

A different form of assessment could be for students to submit work in the form of an audio podcast. In practice this is an audio file placed on a University server and/or submitted by students on CD. Cane and Cashmore

(2008) ran a pilot study in 2007 with a group of students studying genetics. The students were required to submit an assessment in the form of an audio podcast. Feedback on the process was positive. The acquisition of transferable skills in producing the podcasts was highlighted and regarded as motivating by students since they were doing something different.

As a potential marketing tool for courses, students could be paid to put together one or a series of podcasts which could be put on university and course websites or issued to UCAS applicants via CD. Competent students could use their radio production skills to gather material for 'an insider's guide' to their university or course. It makes sense for potential applicants to hear the true voices and experiences of real students in a form and using technology with which they are familiar (i.e. a downloadable audio file) with those students' perspectives. Extracts from seminar group work, interviews with students and staff and examples of extra-curricular activities could all form part of such a podcast, mixed together professionally by the student with guidance from audio-based teaching staff.

Changing technologies

Students can get their own voices – and those of others – heard both cheaply and simply. In most universities equipment will be available for recording through a media resources service but for some, the bug may bite and the student will want to get his or her own gear.

Basic but adequate software such as the open source sound editor 'Audacity' can be downloaded, both for Mac and PC, free of charge. Other paid-for software is available, offering more effects and easier operation such as Adobe Audition (Versions 1.5 or 3 for PC only), Flash card or hard disk digital recording machines capable of producing good quality sound can be bought new from £150 upwards whilst older technology in the form of minidisc machines can be bought online for around £15. Minidisc machines are perfectly acceptable recorders but transfer of the audio file to the sound editor needs to be done in real time. A 20 minute recording takes 20 minutes to transfer. Hard disk machines transfer files in seconds. Invest in a good quality microphone. This will make all the difference to the sound quality of the recording. You can easily get kitted out with good quality equipment and (free) software for under £100.

The changing job and media market

Students who are not following radio production or journalism based courses will probably not be looking for jobs working in radio stations as presenters or journalists. A typical local commercial radio station is run with around ten people! But to look at radio stations as the only employment avenue for students with radio skills is also missing the point. Podcasting either for fun or for profit (or both) is an important potential opening for the student to disseminate their work online and a freelance employment source. Skills needed for a good podcast are precisely the same as those needed for a good radio programme or feature. The only difference is that the distribution of the output is by a different means. One is via a transmitter, the broadcast is transient, the other is via the web, it is there as long as you want it to be.

Conclusion

This article has considered several ways by which generic sound, music and audio production techniques and skills can be incorporated into any

imaginative and creative curriculum. The approaches described are not intended to be a panacea. Indeed, some students may be reluctant to embrace new ways of learning and will wish to stay with what is familiar. What is clear is that a range of approaches in learning and teaching is required to create and support a future curriculum that is both motivating and relevant.

This outline of several auditory-based approaches can provide some food for thought in the design, development and operation of courses and modules to kick-start the creative thinking process. In encouraging first year students, in particular, to try new approaches to learning in a supportive and exploratory environment, the transition between Sixth Form or College and the demands of Higher Education can be made smoother. •

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Biography

Tim McClellan is a Principal Lecturer at Southampton Solent University and teaches on undergraduate programmes in Advertising, Public Relations and Media Communication. He is a broadcaster and a former senior journalist in the commercial radio sector. Tim also organizes and runs bespoke courses in media training and podcasting for a range of professional organizations. He is co-author of 'Schools in the Spotlight', a guide to media relations for headteachers and governors and is currently completing a doctorate in approaches to creative learning for undergraduate self-development. Tim is a Chartered Marketer and a member of the Committee of the Radio Academy South. He was also a judge for the 2008 Nations and Regions awards for The Radio Academy

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