

**Listen, Imagine, Compose case study -  
How can performers and composers best be used as a resource in the  
classroom?  
2011-12**

This case study describes the work undertaken at King Edwards Schools for Girls, in Handsworth, Birmingham.

*Participants:*

The pupils involved in this project were the Y10 GCSE group in this all-girls selective grammar school in Handsworth, Birmingham. Reflecting the multicultural nature of Handsworth, a broad range of backgrounds was evident in the pupils themselves.

Composers: David Horne and Sean Clancy<sup>1</sup>

Performer: Kyle Horch

Teacher: Nick Heppel

School: Handsworth Girls School.

*Pre-project planning*

Pre-project planning was a significant feature in the LIC activities as a whole, and this project was no exception. One aspect that was novel in this project was that the pupils involved were asked to think about the sort of music that they wanted to compose before they had begun. This was enacted in part by an on-line closed forum, housed on the school's intranet, which enabled discussion of the pupil's work.

The pupils knew that they would be composing for a solo saxophone, and they knew the name of the performer before they started. This also formed part of their pre-task preparation, and they used the internet to source information about both the instrument and the performer.

Another component of the pre-task planning was discussion between composer, teacher, and researcher concerning the nature of the composing task which the pupils would be undertaking. The composer was quite keen that composing should involve writing, but was happy for this to be in either staff notation, or in the form of graphic scores. There was considerable discussion about this aspect of the work. As things transpired, only one of the pupils used graphic notation, and this was simply to give a shape to her melodic ideas, she transferred to staff notation once she was happy with this.

*The project*

One factor of this particular project was the nature of the music room itself. This was situated in a converted Victorian-era church, which the school had acquired. The size and acoustic of this rather large space meant that performer could work at one end of space, and the sounds he made, although

---

<sup>1</sup> In this account DH was 'the composer', with SC as his student, who also contributed significantly to the project.

always present, were not so loud as to impact negatively on the other pupils working. Indeed, the constant immersion in the sounds of the saxophone meant that the sound-world of the instrument was constantly in the consciousness of the young composers.

Initial stages of the project involved the composer talking to the pupils about a number of factors, including referring to the original thought the pupils had had about what sort of piece they wanted to write. There was also discussion concerning the notion of contrast in music, and how this might be obtained. Following this the pupils set off to work individually. Some chose to work using tuned percussion, or keyboards, another used the classroom piano. Some eschewed instruments and began notating straight away.

After the initial stages of the project, in subsequent sessions there was very little use of other instrumental forces, the pupils composed directly into staff notation, and used the performer to play their ideas to them, so an ongoing factor in the way the pupils worked was having regular feedback, both musical and verbal, from the performer.

#### *Modus Operandi*

A routine of working became established in the classroom, which involved the composers working with individual pupils, and having discussions with them about the ways in which they working, what they were doing, and what they wanted to achieve. At the same time the class teacher would also be available for discussions with pupils, as well as for matters of organisation or sequencing activities.

#### *Reflection sessions*

One of the ways in which the LIC project differed from a more usual composer and/or performer in residence education programme was in the time devoted to being away from the pupils for the key stakeholders. Pre-project planning time was followed by significant amounts of reflection time built into the ongoing teaching and learning of composing. These sessions were attended by composer(s), performer, teacher, and researcher(s). One of their key benefits was that they enabled quite in-depth discussion concerning the nature of the work, the foci being taken, and the ways in which the project could be taken forwards. Indeed, these reflection session were most useful

#### *Emerging Themes*

From the reflection sessions a number of themes emerged. These included:

- Intentionality
- Questioning
- Discussions

Each of these aspects impact upon the others, and so it is not possible to separate them out for individuated discussion. However, as themes they are worthy of close investigation.

Early on in the reflection sessions the issue of questioning became apparent. This arose originally from the reflective discussions between the composer, teacher and researcher. Indeed, as a result of these conversations the composer observed that he had become very aware of his own professional practice in this area, and that as a result of these reflections he was considering very carefully not only *what* he was saying to the pupils, but also *how* he was saying it, in terms of the way he was framing the questions he asked. He observed:

I was thinking a lot more about what I was saying; I was thinking why I am saying what I am saying. It's important to compliment and to point out the good things that are going on. So while I was doing that I was getting them to talk a lot, and ask questions.

As a key feature of this project had been the emphasis on intentionality, the composer wanted to work *with* the pupils to uncover what their intentions for the music they had planned was to be. This entailed asking questions of them. The sorts of questions which were being asked were ones which teachers would characterise as being assessment for learning (AfL) interventions. They were aimed at moving the learners towards the higher stages of Bloom's taxonomy (ref). Indeed, in the revised version of Bloom's taxonomy *creation* occupies the pinnacle position in terms of higher order thinking.

The conversations that the composer was having with the pupils were much more in-depth than the teacher felt that he normally had. Some of these conversations between composer and pupils were timed, with some conversations taking up to fifteen minutes. When this was pointed out to the composer, he was quite surprised, not having realised that they were taking so long.

A number of composer-pupil transactional conversations were observed, and from these three forms of interaction can be determined and labelled. These are:

- Questions
- Evaluative Comments
- Statements

*Questions:*

Questions asked commonly included these stems

- 'What would happen if...'
- 'What about...'
- 'I wondered if...'
- 'I think you could...'
- 'I can't persuade you...'
- 'You could try...'
- 'I think that...'

It is important to notice that the composer was framing his ideas for the pupils in the form of questions, rather than saying directly 'do this', he was framing them in such a fashion that pupil intentionality remained to the fore. At all time these piece were in the ownership of the pupils, the composer was not composing on the pupils, as it were, he was acting as a sounding-board for their ideas.

### *Evaluative Comments*

These commonly included:

- 'I like...'
- 'Good idea...'

### *Statements*

Often began:

- 'I notice that...'
- 'You are quite clear that...'

Again, the notion of intentionality is important here. In a reflection session, the composer observed:

I have been trying not to direct the students as much, hence why I have been asking more questions and just trying to get them to talk about their music and why and what they have been doing. That has been constructive for me, as it is then a better way of getting a sense of their levels (*NB – 'levels' not being used in the National Curriculum sense*)

### *Writing – composing*

There can be an unconscious linking of the terms 'writing' and 'composing', and in the pre-project discussions these ideas were explored in some depth. All too often composers use the two words as synonymous, and this can create a semiotic imbalance between the two processes in the minds of the pupils. Although this was a composing-involving-writing project, the composer was clear that he was not using the two words as synonyms. The purpose of 'writing' was not one of what (Stronach, 2002) would refer to as 'riting', in other words the *writing* was not central to the purpose of composing, but was a means of reifying compositional ideas. This is an important concept in terms of the way in which the intentionalities of the pupils was helped into realisation.

### *The performer*

The pupils used the performer to formulate ideas, and to bring those ideas alive, from intentionality to realisation. The ways in which they used the performer included:

- Listening skills
- Figuring out ideas
- Giving specific directions to performer
- Independent learning

- Sharing ideas
- Performer offering options

In a reflection session the performer observed:

I am really just trying to give her [the pupils] an idea of what it sounds like, so she can see if it sounds like what she thought it was going to sound like. I am not a composer, so I am not trying to tell her how to compose the piece, but just give a response as a musician.

As there was both a composer and a performer in this project, a fairly clear division of labour occurred. This meant that the composer dealt with the compositional process, and the performer was concerned with matters appertaining to bringing the composition to life.

We have already seen that the composer did not want his role to include correcting work that the pupils had done in notational terms. Aspects of this, however, did need to be dealt with on a micro-level by the performer in order to ensure he was fully able to realise the compositional intentions of the pupils. One of the effects of this was that the performer was also involved in questioning interactions with the pupils, and one of the ways in which this was manifest was in uncovering exactly what the pupils had in mind when they put pen to paper.

The first level of questioning which the performer tended to use with regard to this was one of immediate intentionality. Typical questions included:

- What is this note? Is it on a line or a space?
- You had a sharp here, should I carry that sharp forward to this point too?
- How fast does it go?

The performer explained the rationale behind the questions:

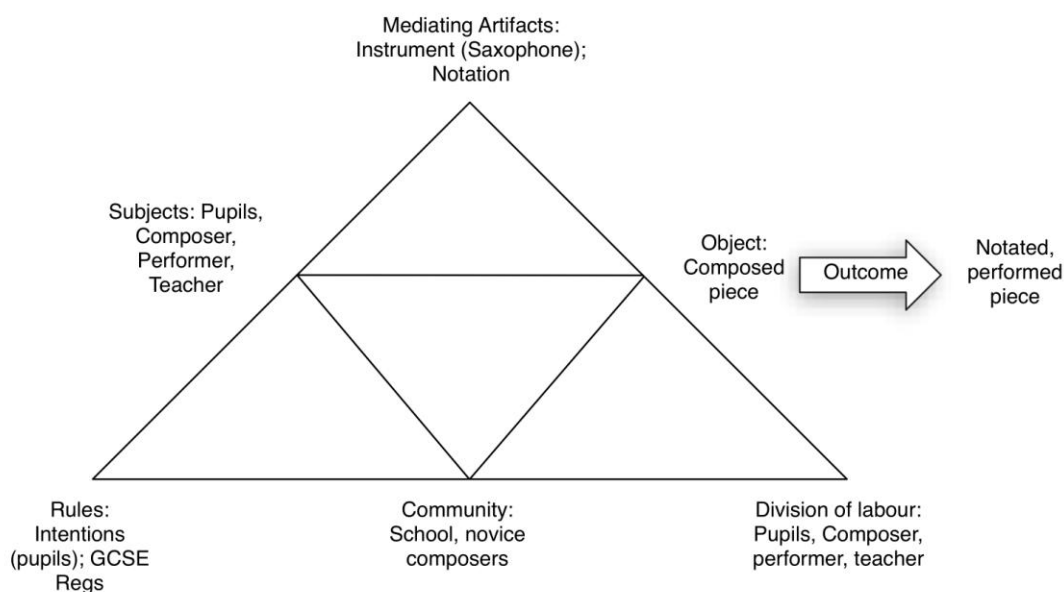
The reasons behind these questions were: so I could play the music accurately and therefore provide the aural example I felt it was my role to provide. Also sometimes to gently bring up issues related to the "process" to which I referred frequently in the reflection discussions, where a written score is a sort of message in a bottle from an imagining person (composer) to a realizing person (player) who needs to decode both the specific and implied instructions contained within the score, making them a reality to be heard/appreciated by a listening person (audience). The first job is to be sure, as a player, that I am seeing the specific, objective instructions - pitches, rhythms, articulations, and dynamics - correctly; then I could work toward the more subjective things that might be implied by the score. So these questions obviously helped me get it right for them ... It also pointed out some issues with choices in presentation. For example, in an score with no bar lines, accidentals only apply to the note they are immediately next to, are not carried on to the end of the bar as they are in barred pieces.

The performer was familiar with playing in contemporary music ensembles, and was used to the immediacy of access to the composer that such ensembles could sometimes afford. As he observed:

I am here as a musician. The best thing I can do is to do exactly what I would do as if I were playing a piece by David [the composer], is to look at the score, try and take it on board and if I have got a question I verbalise the process by asking them ‘what does this mean, can you tell me?’. There is a process from one mind to another, one mind to paper to eye to instrument to ear. And I am trying to be the person in the middle of that process.

This is a useful and pertinent observation. This notion of a complex process, with the performer realising the pupils’ composing intentions can possibly best be understood using an activity theory (AT) model (Engeström, 1999). Plotting the elements onto a standard AT triangle gives us this visual representation:

Figure N: Activity Theory representation of composing process



The *activity* of composing is therefore at the centre of this representation, the parts the various elements play go together to make up the conjoint distributed composing activity that results<sup>2</sup>. What is important for the moment to take from this is that the performer saw himself as a part of the process, as he explained:

...questions were to try to help me figure out what each girl was trying to imply in their musical score. As I have said, all scores are by nature skeletal and contain expressive potential beyond what is specifically shown - it is the player's job not just to play the specifics accurately but

<sup>2</sup> NB It is my intention to write up an AT account more fully at a later stage in the LIC research process

also to find this implied potential and make it a reality. With such young composers, often their pieces had a potential of which they weren't 100% aware and which wasn't always intended. And sometimes because scores were unfinished, they could imply various potentials. So by asking these questions I could zero in on what it was intended a bit better. And if the answers were vague or unsure, I could demonstrate a few different potentials and that might help them decide or be clearer in their imaginations about their creations, and help them see perhaps by notating more specifically in one way or another they might communicate their intention to the player more clearly and then have a better chance of having a real performance get close to matching their imagination.

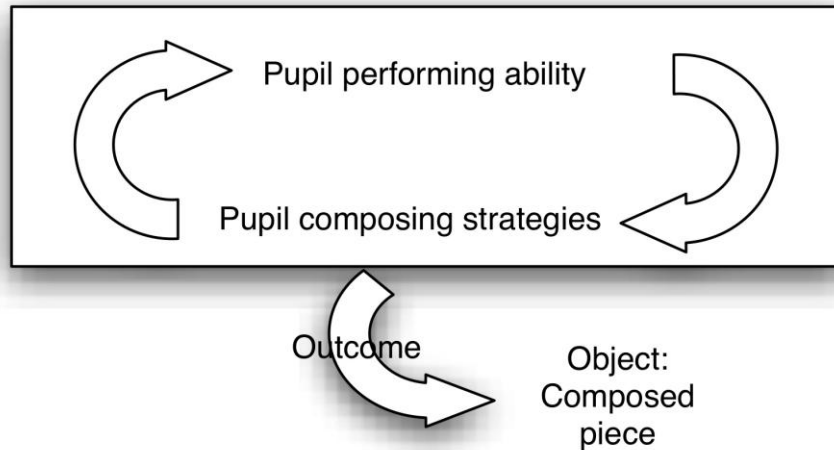
#### *Discussion - Composing and the creative process*

One of the aims of the LIC project was to see what was different about the approaches which the composer and the performer could bring to the pupil composing process. Of these we have so far considered *intentionality*, *questioning*, and the *discussions* which the various stakeholders had. What also became apparent during the course of the composing process was the speed at which composing proceeded. It has been commented upon above that the composer and the performer spent a lot longer talking with (not *to*) the pupils about the music that the pupils were producing than the teacher had been used to. The teacher also noted that there were qualitative differences in the interactions too. Often, he felt, the role of the teacher could be one of keeping pupils on-task, and dealing with moving towards completion of composing projects. Here the conversations were very much focussed on process, of ideas, and of what the pupils were trying to achieve. Task completion happened, without it having to be a central focus of what was going on.

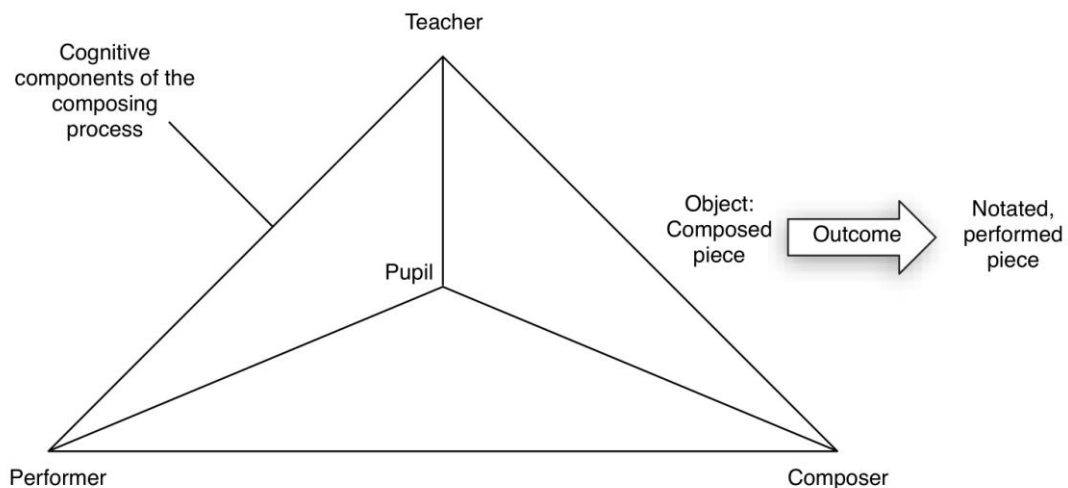
Another unusual aspect of the project was the fact that the pupils were composing for a single-line monody instrument. This was unusual for the pupils at this school. However, the results obtained were sufficient for the teacher to want to add this to the repertoire of composing tasks that he would be using in the future. Added to this the pupils were not composing for themselves to perform. This meant that they were not limited by their own technical accomplishments, but that instead they could concentrate on quality of ideas and their realisation. This freed them up cognitively, as it were, to concentrate on these aspects of composing. In a normally organised composing task for individual composers at GCSE level, all of the cognitive processes of composing are undertaken by the pupil themselves.

Cognitive components of the composing process

Within the pupil...



The AT model of this composing task which was outlined above can also be considered as being the frame of a distributed cognition approach to composing. Here cognitive aspects of the composing process are distributed between pupil, composer, performer, and teacher.



This distributed cognition approach (Salomon, 1993, Nardi, 1996) has the advantage of freeing up cognitive resources for the individual, and allows them to work in what Vygotsky would recognise as a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978, Daniels, 2001) fashion. This is good, as it allows the pupil to attain at a higher level than would otherwise be possible. This is instantiated in this project by the pupils themselves:

I was really excited when I heard that a professional player was actually going to play the piece, it's better than me playing it!



## Part 2: Main themes and evidence in tabular form

MAIN THEMES	EVIDENCE
<p>Questioning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher order questioning (Blooms Taxonomy)</li> <li>• Composers questioning for learning.</li> </ul>	<p>Intentionality. The composers talk to the pupils in three forms:</p> <p><b>Questions:</b></p> <p>‘What would happen’  ‘What about’  ‘I wondered if’  ‘I think you could’  ‘I can’t persuade you’  ‘You could try’  ‘I think that’</p> <p><b>Evaluative comments:</b></p> <p>‘I like’  ‘Good idea’</p> <p><b>Statements</b></p> <p>‘I notice that’  ‘You’re quite clear that’</p> <p>‘I have been trying not to direct the students as much, hence why I have been asking more questions and just trying to get them to talk about their music and why and what they have been doing. That has been constructive for me as it is then a better way to get a sense of their levels’</p> <p>David: I was thinking a lot more about what I was saying, I was thinking why am I saying what I am saying. Its important to compliment and to point out the good things that are going on. So while I was doing that I was getting them to talk a lot and ask questions.</p> <p>The quality of the questions they were asking improved over time and the preparatory work helped this. ‘what do we already know, and what do we want to know’</p>

	<p>Through the process they were discovering the questions that needed to be asked. Which shows an independent form of learning.</p>
<p>Composing and the Creative Process</p>	<p>Composer: 'It is like an evolutionary process'</p> <p>Nancy: 'Borrowing structures from other art forms to make sense of what they are doing'</p> <p>Nick: when we set up the forum and asked 'what do you want your piece to be like' I tried to say to them your piece won't actually be the story or the poem but it will be like but in the end it is music and it has a different set of rules.</p> <p>Composer: we talked a lot about the idea of a story but even then we are talking quite abstractly about the piece itself and they are comfortable with that.</p> <p>Oral imagination. They can voice clearly how they want it to sound. In this project they have been engaging with the sound and they have thought about the sound:</p> <p>'I am writing in this register because it sounds more majestic and I want to write a majestic piece'.</p> <p>As they had already some background knowledge on notation the composer tried not to be prescriptive.</p> <p>'Because many of them used quite emotive adjectives, there was a certain understood language that they created themselves about the kind of pieces they wanted to write' – This gave the composers an understanding of their personal language from the inside which informed the way they got the pupils to think about their work and the language they then used to talk to the pupils.</p> <p>At no point did the composers correct their notation but looked for clarity.</p> <p><b>Nick:</b> I deliberately gave the music</p>

	<p>paper that had no regular stave on it. I like the fact it has not been prescriptive. I wanted it to be free for them to decide.</p> <p>Allowing mistakes to occur but then get resolved - have been a useful way of working through the creative process.</p> <p>The process of not writing for themselves, and not looking at there performing ability. There is a reward of hearing their work played well.</p> <p><b>Nick</b> : no one was push towards a particular aesthetic.</p> <p>The composer's didn't talk about his writing process or style,. He tried hard to make them feel that there is not a 'right' way to compose for the sax., but explore what the sax can be.</p>
<p>Conversations</p> <p>Composers spend more time talking, getting in depth knowledge of the pupils ideas. Rather than checking they are on task.</p> <p>The composers do not correct the pupils work but allows their ideas to flow.</p> <p>Assessment of learning conversations</p>	<p>Some students are much more able to talk about what they are doing than others. Those who were not so expressive I was able to give more directed help, where as with some other students I would say well how can we develop this'.</p> <p>I have found a few times that privately I have thought about something, I remember some specific cases when I looked at their work and thought well I could encourage them to do this. So I asked them what they were doing, they explained. And then I asked them why they were doing that, and they explained very well their reasons. At which point I decided not to make the suggestion I might have made.</p> <p>What we are doing is asking the pupil to evaluate what they have done and why they have done it, and what they think they have done. And looking at essentially at what ways they think they</p>

<p>Pupil to pupil to teacher to composer (via the virtual learning space)</p>	<p>can improve it and facilitating that process.</p> <p>There is no right or wrong answer but what we are trying to do is get them to think about their work contextually.</p> <p><b>The forum</b> created a sense of community, which meant everyone and everything, was cohesive. It also brought the composers into the pupils' world. 'Community of practice' – it also allowed the pupils to discuss and share experiences with each other. It was also a chance to critique their work outside of the classroom.</p> <p>Allowed both the composers and the teacher to develop a language in which to talk to the pupils. 'Pupil speak'.</p> <p>The pupils and the composers developed a language, which was begun by the pupils in the online forum and utilised by the composers within the classroom.</p> <p>The online forum allowed peer to peer conversations which shaped the pre-development of the project, which made it less prescriptive and driven by the pupils.</p> <p><b>Quotes about the online forum:</b></p> <p>David: 'to see what they were thinking about'</p> <p>David: 'to allow conversations between each other' (peer to peer)</p> <p>Nick: 'it allowed them to discuss things that they would ordinarily say face to face to us'</p> <p>David ' it was one of the best way to know where we were because without knowing it a lot of the students were giving away their musical ability and I</p>
---	---

<p>Composer to teacher</p>	<p>found it fascinating to judge how sophisticated they would be'</p> <p>David ' I felt I knew the students a lot more than I would otherwise'</p> <p>It was important to figure out what the teacher wanted to get out of the learning. There were pre-sessions to maximise the time the composer/musician were there and to ensure cost effectiveness. The preparatory work included: thinking about the starting points for the composition, in this case abstract and emotional ideas that they would like their pieces to be about. Then, the online forum which is monitored. This allowed the composer and teacher:</p>
<p>Composer to pupil conversation.</p>	<p>Both the composer and the teacher valued what they both wanted to get out of the students. The teacher outlined what he wanted to see from the students and David took that on board. About being flexible.</p> <p><b>Composer to pupil quote:</b></p> <p><b>Composer:</b> were you happy with the sound of that?</p> <p><b>Pupil:</b> yea, I change a couple of sections but now I think it sounds good</p> <p><b>Composer:</b> I am happy with the dramaticism, I might have wondered about having some dramaticism here as well, have you experimented with that?</p> <p><b>Pupil:</b> I did but I didn't like it</p> <p><b>Composer:</b> Did Kyle play that for you?</p> <p><b>Pupil:</b> yes</p> <p><b>Composer:</b> That's fine, you were able to hear it and then make a decision about it . That's all you really can do, is listen</p>

	and then make a decision.
Performer as a resource to 'try out ideas'	<p>Gives Praise</p> <p>Reassurance</p> <p>Pupils use Kyle to formulate ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening skills</li> <li>• Process of composition</li> <li>• Figuring out ideas</li> <li>• Pupils give direction to Kyle</li> <li>• Independent learning</li> <li>• Sharing of ideas</li> <li>• Kyle offers options</li> </ul> <p><b>Kyle Quote</b>  Kyle: 'I am really just trying to give her a sense of what it sounds like, so she can see if sounds like what she thought it was going to sound like. I am not a composer so I am not trying to tell her how to compose the piece but just give a response as a musician'</p> <p>The pupils felt that they were writing for more than themselves or their GCSE but for something more purposeful and worthwhile. This is what real composition is about , which they got to experience. But what is richer in this experience is they get to hear it as they are working through it.</p> <p><b>Pupil Quotes:</b></p> <p><b>Pupil:</b> I was really excited when I heard that a professional player was actually going to play this piece , its better than me playing it!</p> <p><b>Pupil:</b> you should have seen us when we first found out we were getting professionals , we were like oh my gosh! I think it is a cool thing. If you think about it its really not what most people tend to have during their GCSE. Its like I have a real composition, because its being played by a professional.</p>

	<p><b>Kyle:</b></p> <p>‘I am here as a musician. The best thing I can do is to do exactly what I would do as if I were playing a piece by David. Is to look at the score, try and take it on board and if I have got a question I verbalise the process by asking them ‘what does that mean?’ can you tell me’.</p> <p>‘There is a process from one mind to another. One mind to hand to paper to eye to mind to instrument to ear. And I am trying to be that person in the middle of that process.’</p>
<p>Activity Theory or Situated Learning</p>	<p><b>How to make it a joint project?</b></p> <p>This project opened up further than the composer and teacher but by allowing the pupils also to reflect via the forum meant that the pupils views could be added into the preparation of the project.</p> <p>Ownership for the teacher: Nick: what you are hoping for is for a teacher to see the limitations of what they currently do.</p> <p>The online learning environment &amp; the virtual learning has played an important role in the activity.</p>
<p>What would they have learnt or not learnt had the composer and performer not been there?</p>	<p>Access to an instrument and performer in which the teacher has no expertise.</p> <p>They could hear their piece instantly, which allowed them to assess their pieces and make any changes or add additions. Clarify ideas and sharing ideas , knowing where to go next.</p> <p><b>Nick:</b> I have picked up some ‘composer talk’, which is a new way to ‘get under the skin’ of the pupil. Getting them to</p>

	<p>define what they are doing and their reasoning.</p> <p>Time is precious for the teacher but they are always under accountability for results, it is then the responsibility of the teacher to example to the school the new things they have learnt which can be applied into other classes. Therefore getting value for money. By looking at the faculty data Nick was able to identify the weakness of the faculty as being composing and thus the involvement in the project has opened up new ways of working which in turn will potentially impact of the data.</p>
<p>Musical Understanding:</p>	<p>They have learnt to listen in different ways</p> <p>Nick ‘ listening is composing backwards, you are listening to the thing realised. And by listening over and again and by asking the right questions you are realising how you got there.’</p> <p><b>The Girls Dissemination:</b></p> <p>When we listened to Kyle we change the piece to how we wanted it to sound also the composers gave us some suggestions to help.</p> <p>It became a piece in its own right , even if it wasn’t how I wanted it initially to sound it became something different, which I was pleased about.</p> <p>We have learnt a lot about writing music, and learning to write down what I wanted to hear.</p> <p>We have learnt about getting one initial idea and expanding it into music.</p> <p>We produced pieces we were proud of.</p>



--	--

Key points:

#### REFERENCES

- DANIELS, H. 2001. *Vygotsky and pedagogy*, London, RoutledgeFalmer.
- ENGESTRÖM, Y. 1999. Activity theory and individual and social transformation. *In: ENGESTRÖM, Y., MIETTENEN, R. & PUNAMAKI, R. L. (eds.) Perspectives on Activity Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- NARDI, B. 1996. Studying context: A comparison of activity theory, situated action models, and distributed cognition. *In: NARDI, B. (ed.) Context and consciousness: Activity theory and human-computer interaction*. Harvard: MIT Press.
- SALOMON, G. (ed.) 1993. *Distributed Cognitions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STRONACH, I. 2002. This space is not yet blank: anthropologies for a future action research 1. *Educational Action Research*, 10, 291-308.
- VYGOTSKY, L. 1978. *Mind in Society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.