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Project Intentions

The MA course so far has proven to be both developmental and inspirational from a song-writing and production standpoint. However, I have discovered that through experiential learning, the main strengths in my production skills have been in **collaboration** with other musicians and songwriters. Therefore, I wanted to take this opportunity in the creation project, to develop my **interactive** and **communication** skills with other musicians in the production of 6-8 songs in different scenarios. I have decided to base my project around a song-writing partnership and collaboration project with my peers on the song-writing course. However, where possible, I may also opt to work with other musicians outside of the Tile yard Education community, by sourcing appropriate artists singer-songwriters online. To do this effectively, I will firstly need to identify the singer-songwriters strengths and weaknesses, whereby the selection process will be based on their singing/song writing abilities from previous projects. Secondly, I shall select the correct artist for the song by reviewing and vetting their song-writing history and catalogue via their SoundCloud or YouTube pages. From there, I will make contact with each collaborator and discuss a plan of action, (a sort of pre-production meeting), if you will. In addition, the song-writing camp at Tileyard Education takes place w/c 15th August, and this will be the first face-to-face opportunity to discover like-minded singer-songwriters and artists, where I will share contact information and begin to gather my team of collaborators.

My main production goal for this project is to collaborate in some (if not all) of the following scenarios:

- **2 cover songs** (in different genres in collaboration with artists)
- **2 remix songs** (in different genres in collaboration with artists)
- **4 original songs** (with various artists as collaborators in different styles set to commercial briefs)

It can be said that a music producer needs to act as the equivalent of a director in a film production. This would entail more than just the creative side, and will most definitely involve emotional and aesthetical aspects of the project. For instance, if an artist wants to record a pop ballad track, the producer needs to understand the emotions of the song, and what the artist is trying to convey in the story. Then, the producer can structure the song for maximum effect, aesthetically arranging the music, from a perspective of timbre and sonic delivery.

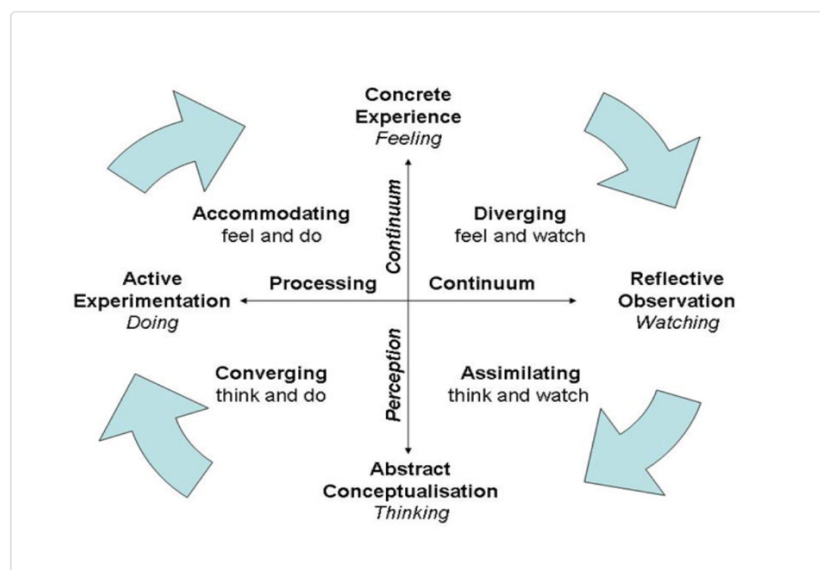


Fig: 1.0 - Kolb's learning styles and experiential learning cycle (McLoed, 2017).

In reference to Kolb's learning cycle (McLoed, 2017), I have come to the realisation that my preferred learning style is 'accommodated'. As seen in figure 1.0, the cycle involves 4 stages, based on experiential learning. My experience so far on the course has enabled me to pass through all 4 stages of this cycle, but with emphasis on the fourth stage, "feeling and doing". To be an effective producer and collaborator in this final project, I will also need to observe,

conceptualise, then experiment with new songwriters, which will impact massively on the outcomes of our work together.

“Effective learning is seen when a person progresses through a cycle of four stages: of (1) having a concrete experience followed by (2) observation of and reflection on that experience which leads to (3) the formation of abstract concepts (analysis) and generalizations (conclusions) which are then (4) used to test a hypothesis in future situations, resulting in new experiences”.

(Kolb’s cycle of experiential learning, McLoed, 2017)

Each songwriter will obviously have one preferred learning style over another, so it will be interesting to see how our learning styles interrelate, when collaborating and generating new production ideas. That said, the cycle will inevitably come back around on itself, and we will find new ways of interacting, communicating, and conceptualising our musical ideas, as the session progresses. Frequent breaks are also key to maintaining a focused mind on creativity, otherwise it can become quite stagnant in a session.

Project Stimulus

The main reason I am pursuing this project is to develop my production skillset and to learn more songwriting techniques from artists and collaborators, which is why I undertook the MA in commercial music production in the first place. But, to my detriment, the skills I have learned so far have not enabled me to decide which type of producer I want to be. If anything, I have learned so much in the MA so far that it has become increasingly difficult to pin-point in which direction (musically and creatively) I wish to take, following its completion. Though, I have narrowed down the genres in which I would prefer to produce and where I see myself in the future of the music industry. Firstly, EDM music (in general terms) has been a big part of my music production arsenal since I started as a musician and guitarist. Secondly, Pop music is arguably the most commercially viable genre in the 21st century, which should be embraced by any producer who wants to become successful in the music industry. This style could really further my potential as a music producer because once the MA is completed, I will have had much more experience of producing to Pop music briefs, and will have gained more confidence as a result. Finally, the third and most prominent styles for me are RnB, Funk and Soul music. I was always an aficionado of these styles since beginning the guitar as my main instrument at the age of 13. My affiliation with these actually stemmed from my love of Blues music, as I’ve performed in blues bands in the past. The general progression from there is RnB, Funk and Soul, with some Jazz thrown in for good measure. However, I’ve not yet fully

exploited this avenue in the MA as yet, so I may be looking to produce in these styles in the final major project to see where it takes me.

In addition, an overarching music production skill for this project that I wish to develop even further are my mixing and mastering techniques. Overall, I would like to think of myself as a professional mixing and mastering engineer, as well as a music producer. The two go hand in hand of course, in terms of delivering a marketable product. Therefore, to become a better producer, you need to understand the techniques that can make the music more aesthetically and sonically pleasing, downstream in the production process. This project is the perfect vehicle to foster these skills, and to experiment with different mixing practices.

Again, McLoed (2017) and his Kolb cycle example refers to the idea of “feeling”, “watching”, “thinking” and doing”, which could actually be viewed as analogous to the art of mixing and mastering. Firstly, as a mix engineer I would need to *feel* the music and what the intentions are for it, followed by *observing* (watching) others, in reference mixes. Thirdly, the *thinking* is where I would conceptualise the mix, and ideally, get a rough balance that at least matches the rough mix. Finally, the *doing* stage is actively experimenting with EQ parameters, dynamics processors and effects, to realise and convey the story of the song, and the bigger picture. Mixing and mastering in a DAW can yield some fantastically pleasing results (notwithstanding a professional production), with the use of outstandingly designed plugins, emulating analogue hardware extremely well. I intend to make full use of all the available plugins in my DAW to generate the best mixes possible, as well as an analogue console, albeit, a Soundcraft Ghost LE.

When thinking about other aspects of music production to develop, I wish to experiment with structure and arrangement specifically, and try to design some new and interesting structures, which are unlikely to be heard in the aforementioned styles. For instance, I might want to implement the structure of a Pop song within a House track instead, and vice versa. Also, the use of instrumentation in different styles ought to be utilised to their fullest potential. Choice of timbre could possibly be the most important aspect of music production, especially when you consider which style of music you are producing. For instance, in Rock music, its unheard of not to have a distorted guitar. However, the music industry cannot grow without experimentation, change and adaptation to the tried and tested rules of music production. To

that end, I aim to select instruments for my productions which are not usually used in those genres. This can bring about a new and fresh perspective to a production in its particular musical setting.

Success Criteria

The final outcome of the project will be based upon the production and song-writing decision making process, and the need to meet the brief for a given artist or genre. The songs that we will produce together shall be pitched through Tileyard Music, through their playback sessions. If any of the original songs are considered by the A&R director, then this would be a clear benchmark for success. However, with regards to the remixes and cover songs in this project, I shall set out surveys via survey monkey where these tracks will receive peer feedback and tutor feedback. This will help determine the success requirements and the techniques required to produce the songs to a professional standard. It will also determine the strengths and weaknesses of each song, and how I could improve them to make them more successful in the real world, ideally before mixing and mastering takes place. In addition, there may be some methods of improvement in the production area as a whole, such as, correcting the arrangement, use of instrumentation, melody and accompaniment relationship, textural aspects, use of harmony, and overall sonic qualities of the music. Moreover, the success criteria for each song should be individual, as they are all different songs, and each one will require a specific skillset to produce in order to meet the brief. It would be beneficial to generate the feedback from non-musicians and non-producers for their feedback also, as they may have a different perspective on the music. When these results have been gathered, I will determine the best possible way forward and start to write out a set of re-call notes, then apply the necessary amendments to the productions.

The Ideal Approach vs Alternatives

Here is one approach to the whole production process taken from the case study of Williams (2020), and how work could begin on each track. Figures 2.0 and 2.1 show this process in a general format, and then again in more detail. In the past, I have literally sat down in the studio and started to write a song, without prior consultation with any other producer or artist, and not really having a direction in mind other than a set brief. However, this case study is a very good starting point, since the ideas are usually generated between artist and producer collectively. When connecting with the client, it is a chance to reflect on their motives for the

project also, and what outcomes they wish to achieve. This is where, creating the base track is really crucial, because this will determine the direction for the song. Of course, it can be changed at a later date, but ideally the ideas we generate in this phase will carry through to the following stages. When producing and collaborating takes place, this will be done in different situations. Sometimes this might take place in person, online, or even via a Pro Tools session collaboration.

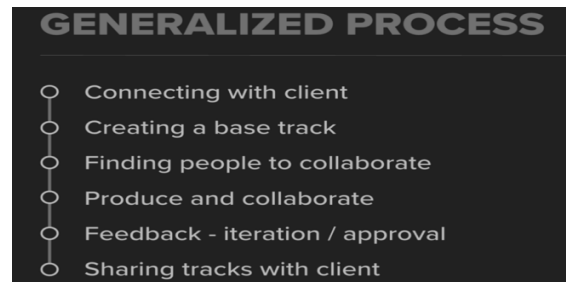


Figure 2.0: Williams' general outline for production process is a good solid foundation, as it ties into the Kolb cycle of experiential learning for myself and the artist. (Williams, 2020)



Figure 2.1: The process in more detail reveals the communication, job roles, and responsibilities of each collaborator in the production phase from start to finish. (Williams, 2020)

There are some alternative approaches that I could take though, for instance, starting with the lyrics first, or starting with the artist's musical idea or chord structure? This would allow me as a producer to fully take on the artists intentions, as a songwriter. Then I could conceptualise

and realise their vision into an actual sound recording that can be promoted and marketed to suit their needs as a recording artist. In his BBC Maestro course, Mark Ronson (2022), refers to the idea that the artist is the key to the energy of the song, and you as the producer need to convey that emotion and energy in an actual recording. But, this can take shape in whatever method is available to you. So for me, the starting point could be that the artist brings a chord progression to the pre-production meeting, and perhaps has a demo for me to listen to, which has some recorded scratch vocals. This could serve as a good starting point, but will need to be re-worked and moulded into a real production and recording at a later stage. The only downside to this 'artist-led' approach is that I would be waiting for the artist themselves to approach me with an idea first? Whereas, I could be more proactive as a producer and take more control, by producing instrumental tracks for the artists to write their melodies against, which in turn gives them a very good basis for a lyric. So I would prefer the latter approach in this project as it means I can take more of the responsibility over the production as a whole. Either way, my intention is to remain true to the artist, and to the task, to remain focused on the outcome of the music in order for it to serve its purpose either for myself, or the artist, or preferably for the benefit of both parties.

Another approach would be for both the producer and the artist to firstly sit down and create a basic outline or idea together simultaneously from scratch. This what generally happens at the Songwriting camps at Tileyard Education. It can take shape as a lyric first, or perhaps a beat in a DAW, or even a guitar or piano chord progression, maybe even a synth riff or bass line. Whichever option is chosen as a starting point, the song needs to have a direction. Preferably, the 'story' of the song should be the artists main focus, whereby the lyrical content leads the way, and the timbre, structure, arrangement and mix are designed to support the storyline and concept of the song. Since I will not always be face-to-face with the artist or collaborator throughout the project, I will need to rely on Zoom or Teams for the communication of our ideas, which has gone really well in the past.

With regards to the cover songs and remix songs in this portfolio, I feel it best to start from scratch and try to develop a new direction. I intend to record and produce two covers based on the collaborator's preference. It is my intention to re-create the songs in a new way that is meaningful (to them as singers), but still maintain the same structure to the tracks, as this will keep them recognisable. I want to experiment with the chord sequences and rhythm of each

chord, perhaps even the voicings and inversions of the chords. Another aspect to explore would be the key signature, for instance, could these songs be re-made in a major key when they were originally written in a minor key, and what effect would this have on the song and the listener?

When thinking about a remix, I would usually try to emulate what others have done before me. This is the danger of popular music production though, in that you cannot be unique if you're trying to be someone else. Therefore, the approach here is to experiment with new ideas and build upon the relationship with the artist as a collaborator. This will be an on-going process, as we communicate back and forth, and input ideas collectively. I will undoubtedly listen to and reference other styles of music which may contain the same instrumentation, arrangements, structure, key, tempo etc. Or perhaps I would reference the same mixing techniques, as these are usually constants that don't differentiate between styles. For instance, equalising and compressing an electric guitar in one style can work just as well in another style, generally speaking. What might change is the timbre and tonal quality of the guitar though, in which case the signal chain (involving equalisation, compression and effects) will take on a new design. This is true of all instruments too, and you could approach the mix in many different ways, therefore, it's what works best for that particular song, and not just how it fits into a category or musical style.

Conclusion

Overall, this project will hopefully serve me well as a producer, to take my skillset to the next level. It would be relevant to the collaborator as well, as they would be learning new skills in their songwriting craft, and would gain more insight into the production process. Ultimately, the musical outcome of the project is not necessarily the 'be all' and 'end all'. For me, it's more about the processes and the journey in which the outcomes have been met that really count. It's about the experience, and how that can help me to generate new musical ideas in the future, especially with collaborators. It's also about the building of relationships (networking), in a musical setting, putting me in good stead for future collaboration outside of the Tileyard community. If (along the way) I can learn something new about making beats, recording vocals, remixing, remaking, or perhaps even learning a new style of music altogether, then it will have been tremendously worthwhile to me as both a music producer and a collaborator.

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