Any sound you can imagine? The Bedroom Producer, Creativity and Popular Music Education

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Abstract
Since the publication of Paul Théberge's seminal book Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology (1997), a series of multifaceted, interrelated and co-dependent technical, economic, social, cultural and musical changes have contributed to the emergence of a distinct role of music-maker that could be termed 'The Bedroom Producer' (although as long as Bedroom Producers have the correct equipment, then the location of their music production activity is immaterial). This article explores the creative context of the Bedroom Producer and analyses the co-current, interactive spheres of music-making that they engage with. These analyses show that are important implications for educators working within popular music education (PME) and the article introduces some of the ways in which educators can use contemporary educational approaches to take account of the creative process in teaching and learning.

Introduction

Paul Théberge's seminal book, Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology (1997) centred on 'the role of recent digital technologies in the production of popular music […] the industries that supply these technologies, the media that promote them, and the meanings they have for the musicians who use them' (Théberge 1997: 5) and even though much has changed in the 26 intervening years since its publication, these four central elements are still just as relevant. Digital technologies have become increasingly integral to the ways in which people record and produce music, both inside and outside of professional recording contexts, the industries that supply digital technologies now also occupy the digital, as well as physical realm and the media outlets that promote these technologies have become more ubiquitous through advertising and social engagement on all social media and video sharing platforms.

The development of the internet is central to the myriad technical, economic, social, cultural and musical changes over the last 25 years too. As high-speed internet connections and music production technologies have become more accessible to some music-makers in certain parts of the world, larger, more globally connected communities of music-makers and their associated cultures, have also emerged through their interaction with social media and video sharing platforms. In this way, it is possible to see the ways in which the more traditional structures of formal musical education are not necessary for some music-makers to produce their own music. Moreover, the ability to play a musical instrument in a traditional sense is no longer a prerequisite and has instead been revised and updated to include other musical or technical skills such as sequencing, programming or coding. As composer, musician and audio educator Paul Draper argues: 'the requisite skills needed for artistic production are different now' (2013: n.pag.).

Through these multifaceted, interrelated and co-dependent technical, economic, social, cultural and musical changes over the last 25 years has emerged a type of music-maker that could be termed 'The Bedroom Producer' (although as long as Bedroom Producers have a pair of headphones and a laptop with a digital audio workstation [DAW], then the space in which they produce their music is actually immaterial). In either case, they no longer need large recording studios for their music production projects because of the increased possibilities presented by the DAW, sampling software and software instruments. Through open digital platforms, Bedroom Producers can distribute and promote their music too without the intervention of the typical industry intermediaries such as publishers, record labels, managers, A&R representatives, radio pluggers and music marketers. Importantly, the Bedroom Producer can make music that centres on their own individual musical expression.

Although Bedroom Producers do not start out operating within the commercial structures of the music industries, their musical practices and resultant productions are not free from constraints and, although their practices may differ from those used in industry contexts such as the professional recording studio, the creative process is the same. This is because, as Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi argues, creativity is not simply the sole preserve of an individual's efforts but occurs through interaction between a creative individual, an existing knowledge system and a related social context (Csikszentmihalyi 1988). These three

elements are described in the creative system (Csikszentmihalyi 1988), of which the knowledge and symbol system is called the 'domain' and the social context refers to a related social group that understands and uses that domain called a 'field'. The Bedroom producer is therefore only one element in a dynamic and interrelated creative system of causality (Csikszentmihalyi 1997) and creative products, such as self-produced tracks, are the result of a creative system in action (McIntyre 2012).

Within this creative system of activity, the Bedroom Producer draws from the domain and chooses a range of different elements from this body of knowledge and symbol system in producing their music. They then present this selection of elements to the field whose occupants evaluate its novelty or creativity (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). The field is the social organization that recognizes, uses and alters the domain and it selects: 'promising variations […] to incorporate them into the domain' (Csikszentmihalyi 1988: 330). If the field accepts the individual's variation then this variation is considered to be 'creative'. In the context of a Bedroom Producer, this process typically happens when their completed track is shared with their musical community and the public more broadly. The field of Bedroom Production, which includes social media, bloggers, influencers, other musicians, engineers and producers, etc., decide upon the track's novelty and, through a complex and non-linear process, it may be added into the domain and become part of the symbol system and cultural matrix. For an idea or product to be creative it must therefore use the domain to create something with an element of originality, it must be valued by the social organization that understands and uses the domain and it must be included into the domain. In other words, it must be 'original, valued and implemented' (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000: 81).

Even though Bedroom Producers do not operate within the commercial sphere of music production, and may not release their music through commercial record labels, they still interact with each of the creative system's elements as they make their music. This article explores the creative system as it applies to the Bedroom Producer and the ways in which the Bedroom Producer is part of co-current, interactive spheres of music-making that include music technologies, music technology companies, music distribution, music consumption and popular music culture. As a result of these analyses, there are some important implications for educators working within popular music education (PME) and the article concludes by introducing some of the ways in which educators can use contemporary educational approaches in their curriculum design to take account of the creative process more generally and help Bedroom Producers move from musical creativity as a form of individual expression to one that is also 'original, valued and implemented' (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000: 81).

Research into Bedroom Producing

As a musical place, the bedroom has been explored as a sub-cultural space of resistance and leisure (i.e., McRobbie and Garber [1976] 1991; James 2001), a space for individual music engagement (Davies 2013) and as a space to produce music (Wilson 2011; Wolfe 2012, 2020; Groenningsaeter 2017; Barna 2022). PME research is well underway in exploring how popular musicians develop their requisite skills and knowledge outside of formal education (Green 2002, 2006; Thompson 2012; Moir et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2017). Studies have also explored the ways in which popular music pedagogy can be innovative in its approach to teaching more contemporary forms of popular music (Burnard 2007; Lebler 2008; Odena 2012; Order et al. 2017) and encouraging new ways to engage with recording technologies and their related practices (bell 2020). As more and more musicians enter the field of music education through a Bedroom production route, it becomes more important to connect these different strands of research and combine them in ways that allow educators within formal education to see the ways in which they can support Bedroom Producers to continue their musical development once they join educational programmes. In addition, it is vital that educators do this without imposing traditional ideas related to Western-Art frameworks, particular biases and/or notions of value on their musical work or practices. One way lies in taking a perspective that considers the creative process more generally and how new music comes about.

Because of the complex factors that govern creativity, research in this area has increasingly moved towards models of confluence. Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of Creativity (1988, 1997, 1999) integrates sociological theories of creativity and cultural within a single model that forms that starting point to begin exploring the creative process. From a systems perspective, creativity occurs though a convergence of multiple factors within a dynamic system of circular causality (Csikszentmihaly 1988, 1997, 1999). In other words, creativity results from the interaction between all of the various elements within a creative system. The Bedroom Producer's task is therefore to use the existing domain of music production, to create something with novelty within it, and then present it to the field of Bedroom production for evaluation. If accepted by the field, the individual's contribution becomes integrated into the domain and the system of circular causality can be seen in operation. The systems model of Creativity is shown in Figure 1:
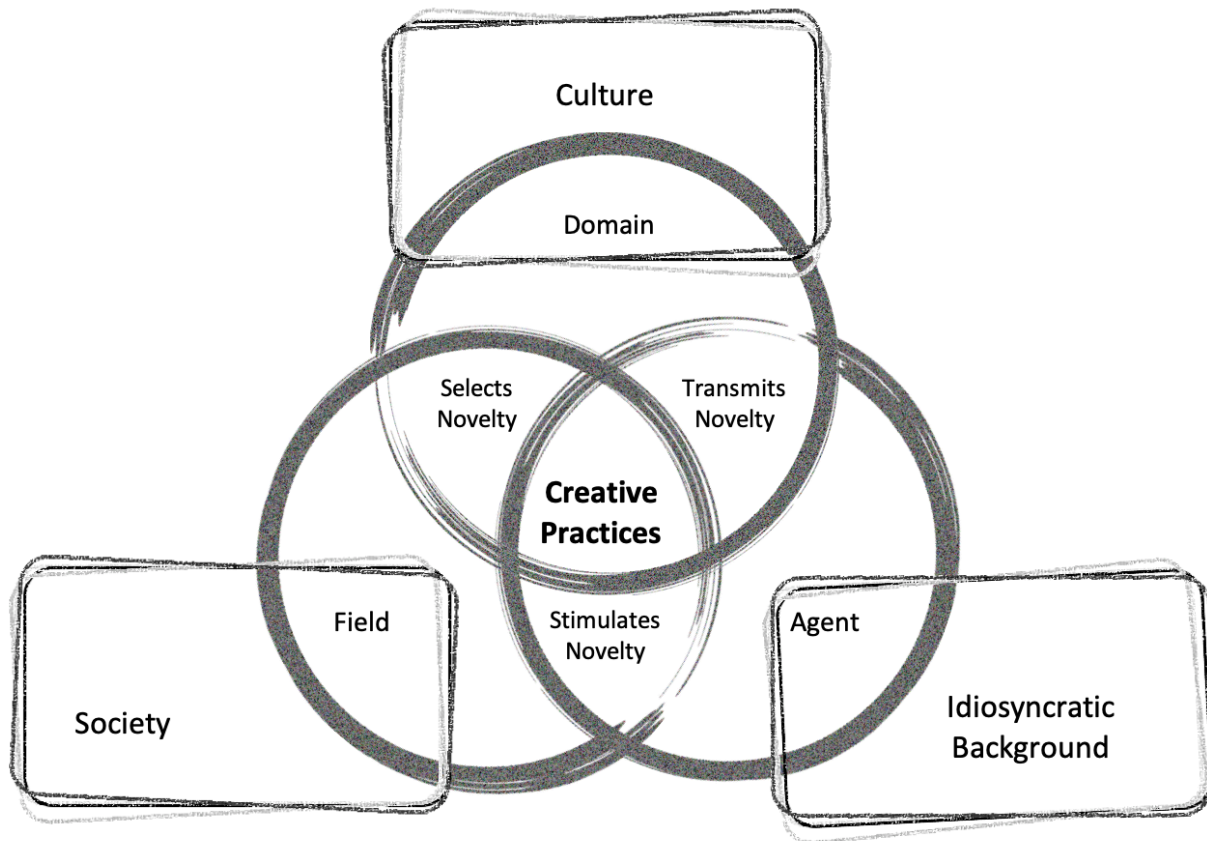
Figure 1: Revised systems model of Creativity incorporating creative practice (Kerrigan 2013: 114).

The creative system and the bedroom producer

Because traditional roles within the commercial recording studio of artist, engineer and producer are all generally occupied by the Bedroom Producer, the domain of Bedroom Producing holds the symbolic rules, culture and practices that span the entire length and breadth of music production. Just like any domain, the domain of Bedroom Production is intangible, boundless, multifaceted with no distinguishable fixed boundaries and so it is only presented here as a discrete element for the purposes of analysis only. It is also important to note that in reality the domain does not exist as a separate entity; it is intricately connected to other parts of the creative system in a convoluted and complementary fashion. It is useful, though, to place some superficial and discursive parameters around the domain of Bedroom Production and theming it into three overlapping broad areas: 'musical', 'technical' and 'sociocultural'. It should be noted here too that each of these themes within the domain does not exist in isolation; each is intricately intertwined and interrelated with each of the other areas.

Musically, Bedroom Production typically requires the Producer's familiarity with the structure and form of the genre in which they produce, which may involve an understanding of the contemporary western popular song, its typical lyrical themes and their settings and the various ways the arrangement is created through the orchestration of instrumentation.

Bedroom Production may also require some knowledge of melody, harmony and chord structures with an applied understanding of how all of these components can be combined to construct the musical arrangement. This domain knowledge is evident, gathered and applied in the act of critical listening; 'the most important thing is to be able to really hear music and love music. People who love music make the best producers' (Miller cited in Burgess 1997: 47). Bedroom Producers often perform on their own productions and so they often need domain knowledge of playing traditional instruments, sampling sounds or programming and playing electronic instruments.

Because they often undertake the task of engineering, Bedroom Producers also require some technical knowledge, which may include application of various electronic instruments, computers, computer software and samplers. If their production involves recording then Bedroom Producers will also need a working knowledge of microphones, monitoring equipment and room acoustics. Domain knowledge of the various audio formats, their affordances and constraints can by vital in the tasks of Bedroom production.

The cultural and social conventions of Bedroom production are governed by the field of Bedroom Production and embedded in the sociocultural area of the domain. This part of the domain includes social knowledge such as how to interact with other producers, artists and audiences in an online context. It also includes applied cultural knowledge such as the use of specific language or terminology to discuss musical sounds and translate sonic descriptions into technical action with others. The sociocultural area of the domain also holds the ideology of Bedroom production, its integration of recording technologies and practices associated with these technologies. For example, contemporary Bedroom production is often the process of piecing together fragments of actual events to create an ideal event (Eisenberg 2005) and may involve generating, shaping and arranging sounds with an aesthetic sense that will stand up to repeated listening. This ideology that relates to modern record-making of all kinds combines the musical, technical and cultural aspects through the implementation of record production's practices of songwriting, beat-making, overdubbing, editing, splicing, compiling and altering timing or tuning, in order to create the 'ideal event' (Eisenberg 2005: 89).

In relation to the creative system, the field is equally important as the domain and the individual (Csikszentmihalyi 1997: 330) and, because of the interrelationship between the system's elements, each one influences each other through a dynamic system of causality. The field, its mechanisms and criteria for selection then also influence the ways in which 'musicians work […] [and] the technological means through which music is recorded, broadcast, circulated, and the aesthetic form and meaning of popular music' (Swiss et al. 1998: 103). Therefore, the field's selection criteria are 'important in shaping the content and form of the musical product' (Robinson et al. 1991: 238). The field, its mechanisms, its criteria for selection and its methods of promotion and circulation of recordings all influence the way in which the Bedroom Producer operates. During the tasks of Bedroom production then, the Bedroom Producer must draw from their internalized knowledge of both the domain and their knowledge of the field of record production. This means that Bedroom Producers must learn the rules and content of the domain and the mechanisms and criteria for selection that operate within the field.

The bedroom is typically a private place where producers can experiment without interruption and, for many, it is a safe space where they can fully explore all of their ideas. But Bedroom Producers' creative activity goes beyond this physical space and they are socialized into the field through various ways and may begin by engaging with the field as a musician, as a DJ, as an engineer or beat-maker, composer or songwriter. Through immersion into the social context of Bedroom Production, producers become socialized into its field. Bedroom Producers may be socialized into different areas of the field first, for example producers who began their domain acquisition DJing in clubs or playing gigs as a musician engage with the live performance area of the field. This gives them an opportunity to develop their knowledge of the songs or tracks that have been accepted by the field in the past. Here they can learn the criteria for selection that operates amongst the audience, which songs or records are preferred and which ones are not. In this way, producers are explicitly studying the criteria for selection operating in specific parts of the field so they can apply this knowledge in future productions.

Some Bedroom Producers may be socialized into other areas of the field through their engagement with online communities or social media, where they are able to identify and discuss culturally relevant or important songs or tracks. This can help them to learn the criteria for selection that operates amongst the community of other Bedroom Producers as well as audiences, which features of songs or tracks are anticipated and which ones are not. Internalizing the field's structures, mechanisms and criteria for selection is a convoluted process that becomes increasingly more complex as record producers gain further experience working within different areas of the field and as the various social, economic, musical, political conditions of the field change over time. Importantly, the duality of being both a music-maker and an audience member of popular music is central to acknowledging that Bedroom Producers are both operatives within and representatives of, the field as they produce their music. Throughout the production process then the field is omnipresent and, consequently, overtly or covertly influences the creative ideas, actions and decisions of Bedroom Producers.

Domain acquisition of bedroom production

Tradition is a vital ingredient within the creative process and the production of new cultural products like a track and so, 'in order to produce something new, one should first become as knowledgeable as possible about the old' (Weisberg cited in Sternberg 1988: 173). The Bedroom Producer must acquire knowledge of the domain of music production so they are able to rearrange: 'the forms and repertoire of tradition' (Scruton 1998: 42), which will allow them to make a contribution that is deemed: 'original, valued and implemented' (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000: 81). Phillip McIntyre terms this process domain acquisition (2004) and it can take numerous forms and involve the acquisition of different types of domain knowledge. Simon Zagorski-Thomas argues that acquiring the domain of production has been achieved in three ways, firstly:

> 'That of getting access to some equipment and learning through trial and error; and that of observing someone who knows what they are doing, getting them to explain, and subsequently copying them […] the practical use of PC-based systems in conjunction with a plethora of semi-professional and amateur books, magazines and

more recently, websites and internet discussion groups' (Zagorski-Thomas 2014: 164).

However, as adam bell argues:

> the complete picture of their learning is much more complex and difficult to synthesize into either an expanded or more refined model. This impasse stems from the fact that much of the learning that occurs in DIY recording is tacit or implicit. (2018: 179)

Producers are often therefore unaware that learning is taking place. What we are able to discern, though, is that different types of domain knowledge are required for different musical styles and producers acquire their domain knowledge in various ways and within different contexts and settings in a complex and non-linear way. Commercial producers such as Swiss Beatz and David Guetta have acquired some of their domain knowledge working as DJs. DJing can provide an opportunity for Bedroom Producers to develop an intimate knowledge of records that have been accepted by the related field in the past and also see which records are preferred by audiences during a DJ set. Some commercial producers acquired parts of the domain as songwriters, Sylvia Robinson, Linda Perry, Kara DioGuardi, Lieber and Stoller, learnt the domain of producing by first writing songs for other artists. In a similar way, some producers acquired the domain by composing or 'producing' the musical track on a commercial record. Pharell Williams, Timbaland and Max Martin, for example, learned various aspects of the domain through their practice as electronic or Hip hop or Pop music producers. Some producers learned the domain during their time as engineers; Sylvia Massy, for example, began as an assistant engineer at Starlight Studios in San Francisco and then later at Lion Share Studios and Larabee Sound in Los Angeles. More contemporary forms of domain acquisition occur through studying production at educational institutions and, often in the case of the Bedroom Producer, through the internet. Daniel Walzer (2017) notes from Mo Taha's documentary film The Rise of the Bedroom Producer that:

> 'The internet inspires a global movement of new ideas and creativity through social networking websites like SoundCloud and YouTube. Bedroom Producers consume and produce finished mixes and works-in-progress (Taha, 2011). Online networks encourage peer collaboration, and users reference these communities to sculpt new sounds and patches for use in home mixing projects' (Taha 2011, quoted in Walzer 2017: 27).

This more contemporary form of domain acquisition is part of a broader 'participatory culture' (Burgess) in which:

> 'The bedroom music genre demonstrates how relatively simple uses of video technology (recording straight to camera and uploading without much editing) and highly constrained genres (the musical cover), while not necessarily contributing to the aesthetic 'advancement' of the medium, can invite further participation by establishing clear rules. The longevity of the video's popularity, I would argue, is a function of the extent to which the culture surrounding the neoclassical cover music

video invites participation and rewards repetition and ongoing engagement' (2014: 94).

Each producer acquires the domain differently, has a unique combination of domain knowledge and learns the musical, technical and sociocultural aspects of the domain as part of an ongoing process of domain acquisition within the specific context of their musical style and the broader sphere of music production.

The Bedroom Producer and Systems Centred Learning

The development of Théberge's four central themes of 'the role of recent digital technologies in the production of popular music [...] the industries that supply these technologies, the media that promote them, and the meanings they have for the musicians who use them' (Théberge 1997: 5) has also impacted the ways in which PME has developed over the intervening years. In their recent study on music making, The Associated Board for the Royal School of Music (2021), reported that more than a quarter of young music-makers in their study and 13 per cent of adults, all used digital technologies to make music. Consequently, audio and music educators can expect a notable rise in the number of digital musicians or Bedroom Producers, entering formal music education who may have a range of more contemporary musical skills such as sequencing, programming or coding without playing an instrument in the traditional sense.

So, how can research into creativity help educators help musicians in developing their musical practice, skills and knowledge and what does this mean for educators and Bedroom Producers entering the formal structures of PME? Looking through the lens of the Creative System (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000) allows us to see how new tracks emerge from the interaction between the system's elements (producer, domain and field) as the Bedroom Producer realizes their musical ideas. But, because of the structured nature of formal PME, curricula can place an emphasis on the transfer of domain-specific knowledge to individuals. As the Creative System shows, this is a critical part of the creative process but, if curricula tend towards delivery of popular music concepts and practices, they limit creativity because they can overlook interactions with the field (McIntyre 2012). McIntyre defines creativity as: an activity where some process or product, one considered unique or valuable in at least one social setting, comes about from a set of antecedent conditions through the located actions of a creative agent. Each factor belongs to a system in operation and creativity emerges from that system in operation (McIntyre 2012: 204). So, if audio and music educators are educating for creativity, formal PME should focus on delivering or transferring a particular symbol/knowledge system to the learner and introduce the mechanisms and criteria for selection that govern the selection of creative work.

Taking this idea one step further is the Systems Centred Learning (SCL) model (McIntrye et al. 2018). The SCL model uses the systems model of Creativity as the central framework and overlays an additional set of elements that relate to the specific context of education as shown below in Figure 2.
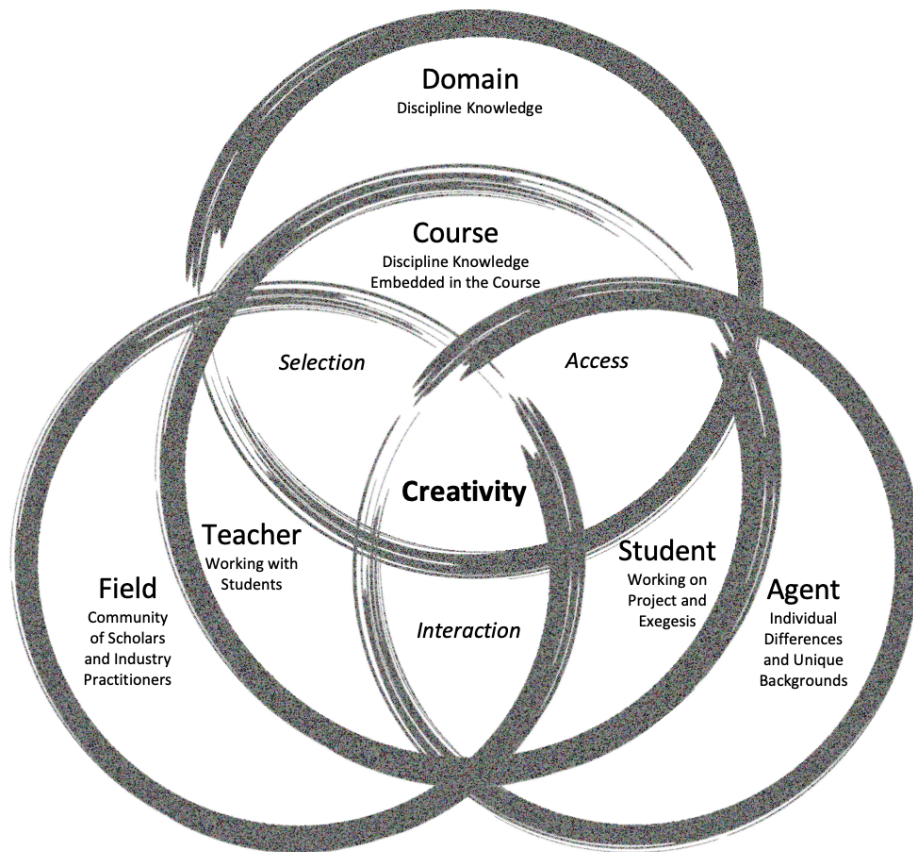
Figure 2: SCL model (McIntyre et al. 2018: 113).

The domain is shown as a symbol system, forms, rules, conventions and cultural matrix that are embedded into a curriculum, such as a course, module or entire programme. The field is represented as the set of experts who make judgements about the knowledge base. In this instance, teachers are the main focus of the field although some industry practitioners and student peers, as well as administrators and technical support, also act as members of this specific educational field (McIntyre et al. 2018: 114).

The choice-making entities, or the individual agents, in this model, are the students (McIntyre et al. 2018: 114). McIntyre et al. argue that the model is not prophetic but helps to emphasize the conditions that are necessary for creativity to occur. Without these conditions then, creativity is unlikely to happen and they argue that: 'what we are doing is setting the conditions for creativity and allowing the dynamic actions of the systems to afford the emergence of creativity in this educational setting, hence we are educating for creativity' (McIntyre et al. 2018: 115).

Both the systems model of Creativity and the SCL model connect with other useful ideas present in the field of Popular Music Education (PME), for example Clint Randles (2022) underlines ways in which the teacher, educator or mentor is an integral part of both setting the stage and providing critical feedback in fulfilling the role of the field and helping students to appreciate the mechanisms and criteria for selection that operate within a respective field. When brought together, both the systems model of Creativity and the SCL model can provide a useful framework for educators in integrating informal approaches and

practices and, importantly, cultivating the conditions for creativity to occur beyond individual creative expressions in music. As well as helping Bedroom Producers to explore the traditions of their musical context, this approach also encourages them to connect their individual musical practices to broader cultural traditions in popular music. In this way, it helps them to go beyond individual musical expression and allows them to see their musical work as part of a given tradition or musical context and create musical work that is 'original, valued and implemented' (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000: 81).

Conclusion

From changes within, to, and the four central elements of 'the digital technologies in the production of popular music, the industries that supply these technologies, the media that promote them, and the meanings they have for the musicians who use them' (Théberge 1997: 5) have emerged new forms of music and different ways to create it. As high-speed internet connections and cheaper music production technologies have become more affordable in particular parts of the world, larger, more globally connected communities of music-makers and their associated cultures have also emerged through their interaction with social media and video sharing platforms.
In this contemporary setting, the ability to play an instrument in a traditional sense is no longer required and has been supplemented with other musical or technical skills such as sequencing, programming or coding. Contemporary Bedroom Producers with access to technology including the internet are able to bypass established structures of musical education in order to produce their own music. Although seen to be operating outside of the traditional structures of music education and the commercial recording industries, Bedroom Producers' resultant productions are not free from constraints and, although their practices may differ from those used in industry contexts such as the professional recording studio, the creative process is the same. As Csikszentmihalyi (1997) argues, creativity occurs through interaction between the creative individual, an existing knowledge system and a related social context. The Bedroom Producer is therefore only one element in a dynamic and interrelated creative system of causality and creative products such as self-produced tracks are the results of a creative system in action (McIntyre 2012). Gaining an understanding of the elements of the Bedroom Producer's creative system is therefore useful from both an educational and research perspective to help frame this type of musical activity.

Because traditional roles within the commercial recording studio of artist, engineer and producer are all generally occupied by the Bedroom Producer, the domain of Bedroom Producing holds the symbolic rules, culture and practices that span the entire length and breadth of music production, which include overlapping musical, technical and sociocultural areas. If they are not connected to formal PME in some way, Bedroom Producers will typically acquire this domain knowledge through informal, complex and non-linear means. The Bedroom Producer must also come to learn what's expected from their musical output, which is the field, its mechanisms, its criteria for selection, its methods of promotion and circulation of recordings, because they all influence the way in which the Bedroom Producer operates. Socialization into the field can take many forms but often involves some engagement with online communities or social media, where communities of producers can discuss culturally relevant or important songs or tracks, which then help to make explicit the

criteria for selection operating amongst the community of other Bedroom Producers, as well as audiences.

Educators working in formal PME can apply these ideas in educating for creativity, where often formal education focuses on delivering or transferring a particular symbol/knowledge system to the learner and may not introduce or emphasize enough, the mechanisms and criteria for selection that govern the selection of creative work. The SCL model (McIntrye et al. 2018), brings together a systems approach to creativity in providing the conditions for creativity to occur in a formal educational setting. The SCL model uses the systems model of Creativity as the central framework and overlays an additional set of elements that relate to the context of education where a domain of knowledge and its subset is an educational programme, module or course, a field of experts and its sub-set is a teacher or educator, and the agents are the students. In this way, an SCL approach integrates contemporary educational approaches within curriculum design, which takes account of the creative process more generally. Importantly, it can help Bedroom Producers move from musical creativity as a form of individual expression to one that is also 'original, valued and implemented' (Csikszentmihalyi and Wolfe 2000: 81) and allows them to see that in bedroom production, they are not working alone, they are individual parts of an interactive, dynamic system of music-making as they apply a range of technologies, knowledge and skills to create any sound they can imagine.

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