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## Creative Group Work as a Central Pedagogical Strategy in the Orff-Schulwerk Approach

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## Presentation from the IOSFS Convention 2021

### Creative Group Work as a Central Pedagogical Strategy in the Orff-Schulwerk Approach

*Andrea Sangiorgio*

Play, creativity and group learning can often be complex, messy and unpredictable and can represent a challenge for the teacher who wants to plan for them. In this article, I aim to briefly illustrate a possible "pedagogy of creative group work" applied to the Orff-Schulwerk classroom, based on my own teaching experience and research (Sangiorgio, 2016). I outline the major phases of the group creative process, providing some considerations about relevant pedagogical strategies in planning, implementing and evaluating each of them.

#### Preparatory Phases

**Warm-up.** At the beginning of a session the group needs to 'get there'. You may use a ritual activity, a movement game in pairs, a song, or any kind of activity which brings them to an optimal level of physiological and psychological arousal and in contact with each other. Often I begin with synchronisation activities, such as dancing to rhythmic music, inventing movements, coordinating with a partner. Alternatively, I might begin with rhythm patterns, with voice and movement or body percussion – something energising, moderately activating, unifying, possibly enhancing physical, cognitive, emotional and relational presence.

**Introducing the theme/idea.** This phase may include direct instruction and reproduction of models offered by the teacher as a starting point for the later creative phase. It could also be important to introduce here some moments of improvisation or invention – on one's own, with a partner or within the whole group – which stimulate children's imagination and their personal connection to the theme. The goal is here to provide impulses, build up or reactivate relevant information, develop skills, concepts and ways of thinking in relation to the guiding idea you are bringing to the group.

#### Modelling the Creative Group Task

Before children work in pairs or small groups, it is crucial to ensure that they build a conceptual model of what they are expected to do.

**Modelling and explaining.** The teacher shows the idea to be explored, giving one or more examples of how to solve the creative task, and at the same time verbalising what s/he is doing, possibly involving children with open questions. In these first instances, the language is kept deliberately simple, near to children's experience. More technical terms or concepts are introduced later on.

**Modelling (teacher with child).** The interactive behaviours are then modelled directly with one or more children. Through a sufficient number of examples, the idea is examined in its various aspects and the heuristic strategies and metacognitive strategies in accomplishing the task are made explicit. Modelling with a child is also a precious source of information for the teacher as to what difficulties or misunderstandings may emerge in children's reasoning. Further, having seen how other members of the group have dealt with the activity, other children may perceive the task as accessible. Involving children in making a chain of choices

helps the group understand how the creative task can be solved and acts as a sort of bridge towards the later phase of autonomous group action.

***Trying out and developing children's ideas in the whole group (with teacher coaching and scaffolding).*** In this phase, children's suggestions are taken as a starting point and the cognitive strategies or the procedures for tackling the creative task are further articulated and reflected upon. This process of constructing single children's ideas with the whole group, of examining further alternatives and pointing out specific features of the task contributes to preparing children for the group work phase.

I derived the pedagogical strategy of modelling from the cognitive apprenticeship approach (Collins & Kapur, 2014; Sangiorgio & Hennessy, 2013). I find it very useful especially in the case of creative, open-ended processes, where children do not have to reproduce any given content, but have to understand how to think strategically in order to accomplish the task.

Some helpful instructional principles for this phase of work can also be drawn from research about **worked examples**, an instructional strategy also rooted in a cognitive-constructivist perspective (Atkinson, Derry, Renkl, & Wortham, 2000). A worked example provides a step-by-step procedure for solving a problem or carrying out a task. They present a problem-solving model for the learners to study and emulate. Worked examples are a useful way to reduce the cognitive load during the initial phases of skill acquisition and facilitate the processing and construction of the relevant cognitive schemas which later on have to be used in the proper problem-solving phase (in our case, the actual creative group work phase). Based on a sufficient number of examples, learners should better be able to understand the underlying concepts, principles or thinking strategies common to the examples and to apply them flexibly to similar problems.

With regard to creative activities in elemental music education, worked examples should be designed so as to integrate all sources of information – including multiple modalities of presentation such as music, movement, verbal language, forms of visual representation and notation – into one unified and consistent presentation. While the task is being demonstrated or discussed, it is important to direct learners' attention to relevant parts of the worked example and to clarify subgoal tasks that represent the building blocks of the creative problem at hand, e.g. by labelling and specifying each step in the process and explaining / demonstrating related concepts and skills.

Open questions – to be answered based on the characteristics and constraints of the context – regard:

- how many worked examples should be presented during the modelling phase (I would suggest at least two or three),
- how worked examples should be selected, presented and sequenced, so that each successive example can coherently build on the previous examples, providing sufficient variety and proceeding from simple to complex,
- how themes, concepts or strategies should emerge and be made explicit through a number of different examples.

The importance of the modelling phase lies in the fact that it helps children understand the kind of creative problem they have to solve, the specific aspects and the subgoals of the task, and the kind of outcomes that a specific creative activity might produce. At the end of this phase they should be ready for the successive independent group work.

**Task design**

A short digression about the task design: as a teacher, it is your responsibility to devise the appropriate task in relation to the skills of the group, their level of preparation with regard to the specific contents of the assignment and the features of the context. Whether you use very open tasks that allow for a high level of control on the decision-making process, or more structured improvisational and compositional tasks in which tighter guidelines are prescribed, the fundamental issue here is to find the right balance between freedom and constraint. This is a basic tension in all creative work. Often it is possible to understand what the group is able and willing to do only by trying out what works best for them – indeed, teaching for group creativity is an open and exploratory process for the teachers themselves.

The table below summarises some of the main features of the task design.

**Key features of group creative task designs in music**

<i>Leading idea</i>	rules, impulses, stimuli, provocations, prompts, ...
<i>Media</i>	movement – voice – instruments
<i>Kind of creative process</i>	exploration – improvisation – composition
<i>Degree of openness</i>	relatively closed, structured tasks (creative problem solving tasks with narrow parameters) open-ended, complex tasks (creative problem finding tasks with open parameters) free tasks
<i>Direction of the form-giving process (Gestaltung)</i>	bottom-up processes (combining elements to form a whole) top-down processes (progressively defining a whole into elements)
<i>Degree of interactivity</i>	cooperative tasks (putting ideas together) collaborative tasks (developing one idea as a group)

**The Group Work Phase**

**Preparing for small group work.** Prior to group work, a series of decisions have to be taken, including choosing or preparing materials (if any), choosing partners and negotiating the groupings, choosing instruments (if any), choosing what to do (especially in the case of free tasks). This preparatory phase and the many organisational and logistical choices involved in it may take more than a few minutes and at times require much attention and patience on part of the teacher, but they are of crucial importance for the smooth and ordered prosecution of the activity.

**Creative group work phase.** Finally, after the modelling, coaching and scaffolding phases, at this point children need the teacher's interventions to fade ('standing back') and leave space for their autonomous work. This is the messiest phase of the work, mainly due to the loud, seemingly chaotic atmosphere in the room. In some cases, it may be difficult for the teacher to gauge whether children are working effectively or not, or to follow what is happening in different groups. It might be important to ask the groups to rehearse their outcomes prior to

sharing them within the whole group (what Fautley, 2005, defines a 'work in progress performance').



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The greatest issue in this phase is whether or not to intervene in the work of the groups. If I do it, I have to make sure that I am not heavily intruding on their own independent work, which I should respect and value. Asking open questions about their intentions is a good strategy. On the other hand, not intervening might be detrimental in case of inconclusive work (for whatever reasons) on part of the children: in some situations it may be necessary to step in and help them work productively, otherwise they might drift off and get to an unsatisfying outcome. There seems to be no exact rule of thumb in such a situation, but there is often a drive towards control on part of the teacher (I recognise it in myself), which should better be contained in favour of a readiness to see what emerges from the groups and to let them work undisturbed. Of course, the teacher should be available if asked and should at all times monitor the situation from a respectful distance.

During small group work, there is plenty to observe for the teacher: in Orff-Schulwerk activities the interactions taking place within the pair or the small group include *bodily interactions* – nonverbal, body-based communication, embodied interactions in movement, embodied musical communication (such as musical gestures and cues or synchronising) – *musical interactions* (extemporary, improvised or planned interactive behaviours) – and *verbal interactions* (task-related verbal exchanges or off-task talk). In addition to this, the teacher should consider the quality of the interpersonal relationships as expressed through the group work and the power relationships existing among the members. Beyond the directly observable interactive behaviour the relevant question is to what extent the group is able to attain intersubjectivity, attunement and mutual engagement, and whether they are able to build a shared understanding about what they are doing together (Wiggins, 1999/2000).

### Performing/Sharing

**Preparing for the presentation of the outcomes.** Preliminary actions include arranging the physical layout of the groups, placing everybody in a space so that performers can see each other and can be seen by the audience, creating an atmosphere of concentration, summarising again what is going to be seen, and possibly offering to the audience a focus for the observation.



**Performance of the small groups.** Each group in turn performs what they have invented together. In some cases, this is still part of the process rather than a concluding presentation of a product. What children have elaborated may sometimes not even be substantial, as they actually improvise in front of the audience, and the idea takes shape or is further elaborated through the whole group discussion.

### Reflection, Feedback and Evaluation

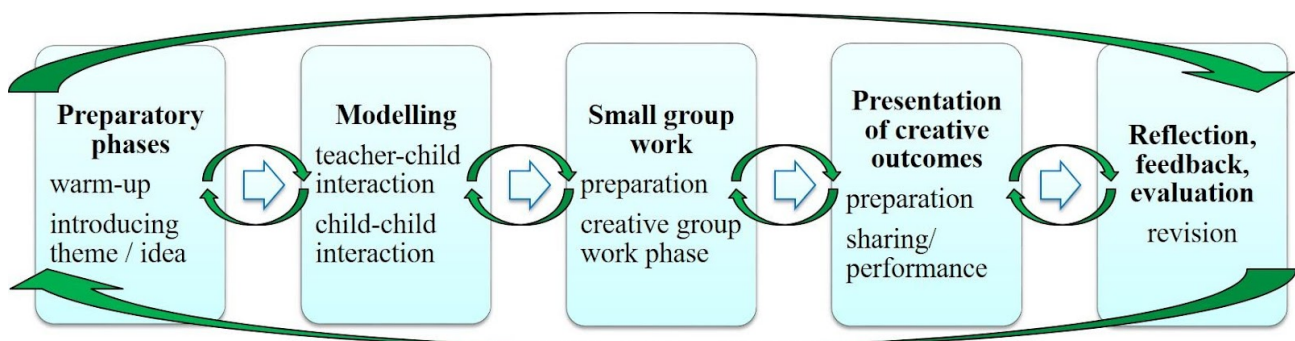
After the performance there might be no comments at all – it will depend on the context, or instead there might be a detailed discussion. The extent to which comments are made depends on the time constraints, children's age, their attentiveness at the moment, and the relevance of the considerations to be put forward. This phase is particularly important because it is here that, scaffolded by the teachers' questions and observations, children can evaluate what has been done, analyse the structure of the piece, ask questions for explanation and clarification, praise what is in their view valuable, propose ideas for extension, meta-cognitively reflect on the creative thinking strategies used, and provide constructive feedback.

In some cases, it may be important or interesting to invite the group to repeat their piece again, in order to try out possible strategies which have been suggested, or to just let them enjoy a second go, especially if the first one did not go well for some reason. Through a second try, moreover, it is possible to check the extent to which the material was pre-established – i.e. what is the invariant framework underlying the different renditions of the piece – or rather invented at the moment. After a first round of presentations and comments, it may also be of advantage to ask children to go back again in small groups and refine their pieces.

This dialogic phase of guided reflection, feedback, and revision is essential for the increased effectiveness of children's group creative work. As a fundamental pedagogical perspective, 'giving voice to children' through such evaluative conversations implies listening to the meanings, perspectives, motives, ideas and feelings that they associate with their own music making. The focus is no longer or not only the created piece in itself (the 'product'), rather it is about the social and creative learning experience that children have through the activity.

### (Nonlinear) Structure of the Creative Process

The phases of the group creative process have been presented so far as a linear succession of methodological steps, as in the figure below. This diagram is useful as an analytical tool and an orientation for action.



However, the process is actually very often nonlinear: according to the kind of material or ideas you are working with and depending on how the group is engaging in the activity, you may want to skip back and forth from one phase to another in a non sequential fashion. In addition to this, you can see micro-cycles nested within macro-cycles of activity, also stretching over more than just one session. In order to represent the nonlinearity of this kind of process, the diagram above includes many arrows between the different phases. Of course, other kinds of visual representation of the creative process are possible (e.g. Fautley, 2005; Wiggins, 2007).

### **Organising Learning Pathways over Longer Periods of Time**

A further relevant issue is how group creative activities can be organised in longer and differentiated learning pathways over time. In terms of pedagogical strategies, what matters is not so much the single group creative task within one session – as presented above – but the whole chain of successive steps and repeated cycles of preparation / group invention / presentation / reflection over a number of sessions, i.e. how an extended sequence of activities are planned, co-constructed and extemporarily structured in the ongoing improvisational dialogue with the group.

### **Roles of the Teacher**

A complex and multi-faceted endeavour such as managing group work and creative collaboration requires the Orff-Schulwerk practitioner to master a considerable range of abilities:

- being an expert in the domain of music and movement
- being a team player
- being a proactive and responsive educator/facilitator
- devising activities and materials that ignite children's motivation and interest
- identifying and fostering children's developing music and movement skills, their creative skills, and their collaborative skills
- structuring effective group learning processes that provide sufficient guidance while at the same time opening up a space of freedom for children's autonomous and successful action.

### **Pedagogical and Ethical Value of Creative Group Work**

Group creativity is a high-order goal in music education. The activity of working and inventing with others – a central pedagogical strategy in the Orff-Schulwerk since its very beginning – subsumes a range of cognitive functions, such as remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating. In the dynamic interaction with the ideas of others, children's independent and critical thinking is fostered. Beyond these cognitive aspects, collaboration in creative music making adds a further layer of relevant social skills, such as the ability to express and communicate ideas, build on each other's contributions, negotiate common solutions, and develop a sense of group identity in the co-construction of a joint outcome.

Cultivating collaborative creativity through group work means giving children agency and ownership of their own learning processes and helps them nurture the artist within them. Moreover, group creative activities tend to facilitate the active engagement and the inclusion of all children, as each member of the group can self-define the extent and the nature of their participation within an open but appropriately structured framework. Thus,

they foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness which favours children's wellbeing. Finally, the ethical values that can be associated with creative group work are: acknowledging the person and her creative potential, promoting intersubjectivity and a dialogic attitude in life, allowing for freedom alongside responsibility, encouraging a multiplicity of perspectives, and cultivating democracy.

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