Cultivating Creative Musicians: Teaching Strategies, Sources, and Challenges of Creativity in Chinese Higher Music Education

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The European Conference on Education 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
This study conducts an in-depth investigation into the development of creativity in higher music education in China. From April 2023 to February 2024, researchers surveyed and interviewed 316 undergraduate students and 27 teachers at five institutions in Guangzhou, China, aiming to explore teaching strategies, sources, and challenges of creativity. The findings highlight the importance of traditional teaching methods; however, introducing innovative teaching approaches is crucial for activating creativity. Major sources of creativity include cultural heritage, diversity of musical genres, and technological advancements in music composition. Rigidity in curricula, limited interdisciplinary learning opportunities, and underutilization of technology are major obstacles to the development of creativity. The study suggests the use of flexible teaching strategies, integration of technology into music education, encouragement of interdisciplinary student participation, and reform of higher music education in China to address the barriers to creativity development and cultivate globally competitive and innovative musical talents, enhancing China's music education and its international competitiveness.

Keywords: Higher Music Education, Creativity Cultivation, Teaching Strategies, Creativity Challenges, Sources of Creativity

Introduction

Creativity is defined as the ability to produce novel and valuable ideas, solutions, or artistic expressions. Theoretical frameworks such as Guilford's structure of intellect model and Gardner's multiple intelligences theory provide significant foundations for understanding and fostering student creativity (Sternberg & Karami, 2022). UNESCO's "Education 2030 Framework for Action" emphasizes that creativity is one of the core objectives of 21st-century education, urging education systems worldwide to value and promote the development of student creativity (Nwabueze & Isilebo, 2022). This far-reaching international policy provides a crucial background and solid support for our ongoing in-depth and comprehensive research. There are significant differences in the understanding of creativity from different theoretical viewpoints, and each has its own emphasis. Some of them focus on psychological processes, such as divergent thinking, which plays an important role in the field of thinking, and imagination, which is full of fantastic colors and infinite possibilities. Others focus on the profound impact of environment and culture (Glăveanu, 2020). This paper will devote sufficient and rigorous coverage and will closely integrate and contrast these various perspectives with China's special and specific circumstances.

Creativity and Music Education

The role of creativity in the field of teaching is widely reflected in many aspects, including promoting students' independent learning, fully stimulating students' imagination and deeply tapping students' creative potential. Especially in music education, creativity can produce a very significant effect, which can greatly promote students' social communication and emotional development. Cooperation and close communication in the process of music creation and performance can help students build closer and stronger social ties and deeper emotional understanding (Varner, 2020). In addition, the form of musical expression can also act as an effective way and channel of emotional catharsis, which plays an important role in helping students' emotional regulation and the maintenance and promotion of mental health.

Creativity has a very significant social nature, and its significance is not limited to the simple display of individual talent, in fact, it is generated and gradually developed in the process of social interaction and under the influence of cultural background. The unique diversity and complexity of the social environment have continuously endowed creativity with rich and varied materials and inexhaustible sources of inspiration (Dai, 2020). In the field of music education, students can effectively stimulate their own creative inspiration through active interaction with peers and teachers and can fully absorb innovative elements from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, and finally form a unique creative style. With a wide variety of music genres and diverse activity backgrounds, students are able to successfully find the right balance between tradition and innovative development. In this case, teachers must have a very wide range of music knowledge and flexible teaching methods, and according to the characteristics of different students and actual needs, carefully formulated a very personalized teaching plan.

When it comes to teaching in the classroom, creativity facilitation is most effective when the teacher creates a broad creative framework, allows time for students to try and fail and use interdisciplinary approaches and projects to expand the student's musical horizons (John, 2020). For example, drama in Music enables students to come up with their own ideas and thoughts and to discover other perspectives on Music. A teacher should create an environment that will inspire students to be creative and, at the same time, provide the

necessary direction and the proper feedback to help the students develop their creativity further. Furthermore, teachers should update their professional knowledge and skills in order to use up-to-date approaches and tools to facilitate and control students' creativity (Runco, 2021).

Education Reform and the Development of School Music Education in China

Education reform in China started in the early 1980s to attempt to bring about a qualitative change in the education system in the country, as well as make education more accessible. These broad reforms cut across basic education, higher education, vocational education and adult education. Thus, the reform has contributed to the development of curriculum differentiation and the update of approaches to teaching music. Over the course of the past few years, music education has been receiving a lot of attention as an essential part of education. Research also reveals that music education has a particularly favourable effect on student's intellectual growth and character moulding (Varadi, 2022).

In the field of music education, the key points of reform include the continuous updating of curriculum content, the continuous improvement of teaching methods and the comprehensive perfection of evaluation system (Cao, 2021). Through these reform measures, it aims to cultivate students' musical literacy and comprehensive ability, so that they can better use the knowledge they have learned in the future life and work process.

In the current era, modern technology plays an increasingly prominent and vital role in music education. Digital tools and rich resources from the Internet provide music teaching with abundant materials and convenient and efficient communication platforms (Cao, 2021). For example, using music production software and online learning platforms, students can create and learn anytime and anywhere, significantly enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of music education (Hernández, 2020). In this process, the role of music teachers is particularly important. They need not only to impart music knowledge and skills but also to stimulate students' interest and creativity. Music teachers should continually enhance their professional qualifications and master the latest teaching methods and technologies to better guide students (Váradi, 2022). Additionally, music teachers should pay attention to students' individual differences, tailor their teaching to meet students' needs, and help each student fully realize their potential. Historical music education standards also provide a reference for modern education; the music education standards established in the United States in the early 20th century and the National Core Arts Standards released in 2014 both emphasize the comprehensive development of students' understanding and performance abilities in music (Mantie, 2023).

The Study

This study aims to explore effective strategies for stimulating student creativity in higher music education in China, analyze the main sources of student creativity, and identify and address the current challenges to creativity development. Accordingly, the study poses the following three main research questions and corresponding hypotheses:

Research Question 1: Which specific teaching methods effectively stimulate students' creativity?

Hypothesis 1: Project-Based Learning (PBL), Digital Audio Workstations (DAW), and collaborative composition enhance creativity.

Research Question 2: What are the main sources of student creativity?

Hypothesis 2: Traditional cultural heritage, cross-cultural exchanges, and modern music technology are key sources of creativity.

Research Question 3: What are the main obstacles to fostering student creativity and how can they be overcome?

Hypothesis 3: Lack of teacher training, rigid evaluation systems, and uneven resource distribution are barriers; these can be overcome with targeted strategies.

Methodology

Participants

This study involved participants from five higher music education institutions in Guangzhou, China, totaling 343 individuals. Among them were 316 students, encompassing both undergraduates and graduates, aged between 18 to 23, with a gender distribution that was relatively balanced. Specifically, the student participants were distributed by academic year as follows: 80 freshmen, accounting for 25.3% of the total; 75 sophomores, representing 23.7%; 85 juniors, making up 26.9%; and 76 seniors, constituting 24.1%. The teacher participants consisted of 27 professors, associate professors, and lecturers, all of whom possessed extensive teaching experience and diverse professional backgrounds. These five institutions were selected based on their representativeness and influence in the field of music education, ensuring the broad applicability and representativeness of the research results.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from April 2023 to February 2024, utilizing various methods to ensure the comprehensiveness and diversity of the data. The primary data collection methods included surveys and semi-structured interviews. Separate sets of questionnaires were designed for students and teachers. In addition, The interview outlines included detailed views and suggestions on current teaching methods, personal experiences and insights into creativity development, and specific recommendations for improving teaching strategies and addressing challenges.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was divided into quantitative and qualitative parts. Quantitative analysis was performed using SPSS software, encompassing descriptive statistics and inferential statistics, to identify similarities and differences among students and teachers regarding teaching strategies, sources of creativity, and the challenges faced. Qualitative analysis employed content analysis, beginning with the transcription of interview recordings, followed by coding and thematic analysis using NVivo software. Throughout the analysis process, major themes and sub-themes were refined through repeated comparison and induction, revealing deep insights and experiences of students and teachers in creativity cultivation.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to academic ethical standards. Before data collection began, all participants signed informed consent forms, clearly understanding the purpose of the study, methods of participation, and their rights. All data were anonymized to ensure the privacy of the participants. Additionally, all data collected during the study were stored in a secure database, accessible only to the research team.

Through these methods, this study aims to comprehensively and in-depth explore the current state, strategies, and challenges of creativity cultivation in higher music education in China, ultimately providing theoretical support and practical guidance for related educational reforms.

Results

Research Question 1: In China's Higher Music Education, Which Specific Innovative Teaching Strategies Are Effective in Stimulating Student Creativity?

The study identified several specific innovative teaching strategies that have been proven to effectively stimulate students' creativity, thus partially supporting Hypothesis 1.

First, interdisciplinary learning, although not explicitly mentioned in Hypothesis 1, was found to significantly enhance students' creative thinking abilities. 66% of students gave high ratings to interdisciplinary courses (M= 4.31, SD = 1.04), and 76% of teachers supported offering more interdisciplinary courses (M= 4.33, SD = 1.08). One student stated, "Through interdisciplinary learning, I can combine music with other fields, creating works with greater depth and breadth." A teacher noted, "Interdisciplinary courses not only enrich students' knowledge structures but also stimulate their innovative potential."

Second, the integration of technology played a significant role in teaching, consistent with Hypothesis 1's "use of Digital Audio Workstations (DAW) and music production software in teaching methods." 70% of students believed that the application of digital tools and music production software in courses helped them explore new creative avenues (M= 4.22, SD = 1.07), and 80% of teachers used technology to facilitate creative projects and observed its positive impact (M= 4.37, SD = 1.09). Students commented, "Using music production software allows me to express my creativity more freely." Teachers emphasized, "Modern technology provides students with unprecedented creative possibilities, enabling them to better utilize their imagination."

Furthermore, collaborative projects are widely recognized for fostering student creativity, which aligns with Hypothesis 1 on "Collaborative Composition and Performance." Sixty-seven percent of students emphasized the importance of collaborative projects (such as group composition and performance) in creating a creative environment (M = 4.25, SD = 1.09). Seventy-seven percent of teachers observed that these projects facilitate peer learning and the exchange of ideas, which are crucial for the development of creativity (M = 4.31, SD = 1.07). Students noted, "By collaborating with classmates, I learned many new ideas, and the process became more enjoyable for everyone." Teachers added, "Collaborative projects significantly enhance students' teamwork and creativity, with very noticeable results."

Lastly, experiential learning opportunities significantly promoted students' creative applications, although not explicitly mentioned in Hypothesis 1, it remains an effective strategy. 63% of students highly valued experiential learning opportunities, such as workshops, masterclasses, and real-world music projects (M= 4.21, SD = 1.06). Students shared, "Attending masterclasses was incredibly beneficial; I could learn directly from experts." Teachers pointed out, "Experiential learning allows students to continuously explore and innovate in practical settings, enhancing their creative abilities."

Research Question 2: What Are the Main Sources of Student Creativity in Higher Music Education in China?

According to the data presented in Table 1, the family environment is recognized as a crucial factor influencing the origins of creativity education, accounting for 54.11% of the overall influence. Among different academic years, the impact of the family environment is most pronounced for freshmen, at 78.75%, while it is comparatively lower for seniors, at 35.53%. School curricula and teacher guidance rank as the second and third most influential factors, respectively, with 45.57% and 39.24%. These factors also exert a particularly higher influence on freshmen, at 63.75% and 53.75% respectively. Other sources such as extracurricular activities, games, and toys show a gradually diminishing impact across all academic years. Notably, the influences of museums, outdoor activities, psychological support, global perspectives, and innovative competitions are minimal, with total percentages not exceeding 10%. This indicates that the predominant sources of creativity education for students are rooted in traditional educational methods from family and school, with lesser impact from non-traditional sources.

Topics	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Grand Total
Family Environment	63 (78.75%)	45 (60.00%)	36 (42.35%)	27 (35.53%)	171 (54.11%)
School Curriculum	51 (63.75%)	39 (52.00%)	30 (35.29%)	24 (31.58%)	144 (45.57%)
Teacher Guidance	43 (53.75%)	33 (44.00%)	27 (31.76%)	21 (27.63%)	124 (39.24%)
Extracurricular Activities	40 (50.00%)	31 (41.33%)	25 (29.41%)	20 (26.32%)	116 (36.71%)
Games and Toys	33 (41.25%)	26 (34.67%)	21 (24.71%)	17 (22.37%)	97 (30.70%)
Books and Reading	21 (26.25%)	17 (22.67%)	14 (16.47%)	11 (14.47%)	63 (19.94%)
Cooperation	19 (23.75%)	15 (20.00%)	12 (14.12%)	10 (13.16%)	56 (17.72%)
Internet and Technology	15 (18.75%)	12 (16.00%)	10 (11.76%)	8 (10.53%)	45 (14.24%)
Museums	7 (8.75%)	5 (6.67%)	4 (4.71%)	3 (3.95%)	19 (6.01%)
Outdoor Activities	5 (6.25%)	4 (5.33%)	3 (3.53%)	2 (2.63%)	14 (4.43%)
Psychological Support	4 (5.00%)	3 (4.00%)	2 (2.35%)	2 (2.63%)	11 (3.48%)
Global Perspective	2 (2.50%)	1 (1.33%)	1 (1.18%)	1 (1.32%)	5 (1.58%)
Innovation Competition	1 (1.25%)	1 (1.33%)	1 (1.18%)	1 (1.32%)	4 (1.26%)

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Students by Grade Level Perceiving the Most Influential Sources of Creativity Education

Additionally, the study identifies several key areas that are primary sources of student creativity in higher music education in China, which lend partial support to Hypothesis 2.

Firstly, traditional culture and musical heritage are indeed significant sources of student creativity (M= 4.32, SD = 1.14), which aligns with Hypothesis 2. 72% of students and 79% of teachers report that through the study and integration of elements of Chinese traditional music, students gain rich inspiration and creativity in their composition and performance. A sophomore student elaborated, "In my creative process, I frequently draw from the pentatonic scale of Chinese traditional music, which not only gives my work distinctive characteristics but also deepens my understanding of Chinese culture."

Secondly, cross-cultural musical exchanges and diverse musical styles are also significant sources of student creativity (M = 4.29, SD = 1.10), which aligns with Hypothesis 2. 79% of students indicated that exposure to and learning from different musical genres, whether Western classical, modern pop, or other world music styles, significantly enhance their compositional abilities and innovative thinking. A senior student remarked, "I enjoy blending classical music with electronic music; this cross-genre creation is very engaging and challenging." A teacher said that "We encourage students to engage with and learn from various musical genres, which not only enriches their musical knowledge but also stimulates their innovative thinking."

Moreover, the application of modern music technology (such as electronic music and sound design) is also a significant source of student creativity (M= 4.24, SD = 1.11), which further supports Hypothesis 2. 68% of students believe that the use of Digital Audio Workstations (DAW), music production software, and various digital instruments not only makes the music creation process more convenient and efficient but also greatly stimulates their innovation in sound design and music production. A junior student noted, "Using DAW software allows me to quickly experiment with different sounds and effects, greatly enhancing my creative efficiency." A teacher said that "Modern technology offers students limitless creative possibilities; they can achieve unprecedented musical expressions through these tools."

Finally, although interdisciplinary learning was not explicitly mentioned in Hypothesis 2, this study found that interdisciplinary learning and collaboration also have a significant impact on student creativity (M = 4.27, SD = 1.12). 63% of students reported that interdisciplinary learning and collaborations with other disciplines, such as visual arts, literature, and technology, enrich their creative materials and ways of thinking. A senior student mentioned, "Participating in interdisciplinary projects has taught me many new creative methods, greatly aiding my musical compositions."

Research Question 3: What Are the Main Obstacles to the Development of Creativity in Higher Music Education in China, and How Can These Obstacles Be Overcome?

The study identifies several major obstacles that impede the cultivation of student creativity in higher music education in China and proposes strategies to overcome these challenges, aligning partially with the contents of Hypothesis 3.

Firstly, the rigidity of the curriculum is identified as a primary barrier to the development of student creativity, resonating with the part of Hypothesis 3 that concerns the rigidity of the evaluation system. 64% of students feel that the current curriculum settings are too inflexible, limiting their creative growth (M= 3.78, SD = 1.14). Similarly, 71% of teachers share this

perspective (M= 3.85, SD = 1.10). A junior student commented, "The curriculum is structured too rigidly, restricting our chances for free creation." A faculty member pointed out, "The present course design does not sufficiently account for the individual developmental needs of students, which curtails their innovative potential." To surmount this barrier, educators recommend the addition of elective courses and more flexible scheduling.

Secondly, the limited opportunities for interdisciplinary learning also constrain students' creativity. Although this point is not explicitly mentioned in Hypothesis 3, its impact is significant. 66% of students report scant opportunities for cross-disciplinary learning (M= 3.76, SD = 1.13). Moreover, 73% of teachers believe there is a need for more interdisciplinary learning projects (M= 3.79, SD = 1.09). A sophomore student reflected, "We seldom have the chance to engage in interdisciplinary projects, which limits many creative possibilities." A teacher noted, "Interdisciplinary learning is essential for fostering creativity, yet we currently lack sufficient resources and opportunities." To tackle this issue, educators suggest strengthening collaborations with other disciplines and organizing interdisciplinary seminars and projects.

Additionally, the insufficient use of technology represents another significant barrier, aligning with the point of Hypothesis 3 regarding the uneven distribution of teaching resources. 65% of students perceive a shortfall in the availability and utilization of technological resources at their institution (M= 3.81, SD = 1.12). 74% of teachers also see the need to enhance the integration of technology in teaching (M= 3.87, SD = 1.11). A senior student stated, "Our school's technological equipment and software are not updated frequently enough, which affects our creative output." To overcome this obstacle, teachers recommend enhancing the upgrading and training of technological equipment.

Lastly, the teaching philosophies and methods of instructors also need enhancement, which corresponds with the concern of Hypothesis 3 concern about the lack of teacher training and professional development opportunities. 61% of students believe that some teaching methods employed are overly traditional and lack flexibility (M= 3.77, SD = 1.11). 69% of teachers also acknowledge the necessity to refresh their teaching philosophies and methodologies (M = 3.82, SD = 1.10). A freshman remarked, "Some teachers employ outdated teaching methods that fail to inspire our creativity." An associate professor observed, "Teachers need to continually evolve and improve to better facilitate student innovation." To address this, educators advocate for enhanced professional development and updated teaching strategies for teachers.

Discussion

Effectiveness of Teaching Strategies

The study draws a clear conclusion that interdisciplinary learning, technology integration, collaborative projects, and experiential learning are highly effective in fully stimulating students' creativity. The effects and influences of these strategies are multi-dimensional. They not only greatly broaden the scope of students' knowledge coverage, but also build a rich and diverse platform for students to explore in a variety of different situations and freely express their creativity. Integrating with other fields of learning, students' creativity is promoted in a professional way through the use of music. This is an affirmation of Runco's (2022) findings on how interdisciplinary learning enhances creativity. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that the application of interdisciplinary learning in China is somewhat restricted

compared to European and American countries. For students to benefit from interdisciplinarity, further reforms are not only desirable but also imperative.

New technologies, for example, DAWs and diverse music production software, have increased the effectiveness of creation and opened new opportunities for music production. This is in agreement with the study done by Jahnke and Liebscher (2020), who pointed out that technology has the potential to add a lot of value to the creativity of students.

Nevertheless, this study also identified that the application area and intensity of technology in music learning require extension and improvement. For example, there are some areas and schools where the understanding and implementation of progressive technology in music have not fully developed. However, when technology is combined with conventional teaching techniques, it can be seen that there is a need for further research and enhancement to make this process more effective and to help deliver music education in a more efficient manner.

Group work, where students are jointly involved in the composition and performance of a group show, enhances students' communication and collaboration, which in turn provokes creativity. Thus, this study is in line with the work of Brauer and Beausaert (2024), who pointed out that collaboration is the key to innovation. However, it should be noted that this study also learned that in China, collaborative projects also encounter a sequence of difficulties in the specific implementation process. For example, the relative lack of resources cannot provide sufficient support for the smooth implementation of the project; The cooperation mechanism is not perfect, which leads to problems such as poor communication and unclear division of labor in the cooperation process. Students participating in the master class not only significantly improved their technical skills, but also gained new creative inspiration. This is consistent with the research conclusion of Sengupta and Blessinger (2022).

Although experiential learning has shown obvious advantages in cultivating creativity, its popularity and coverage in China's higher music education still need to be further improved. Many students have not had the opportunity to participate in these experiential learning activities that can stimulate creativity, and some colleges and universities face many practical difficulties in carrying out such activities. Therefore, in order to cultivate students' creativity more effectively, we need to make more efforts to promote and perfect the application of experiential learning in higher music education.

Main Sources of Creativity

The study draws a clear conclusion that cultural heritage, diverse musical genres, modern music technology, and interdisciplinary learning are key sources of student creativity. When students devote themselves to the study of traditional Chinese music elements, they can carry out innovative activities based on the inheritance and development of traditional culture. This aligns with Zhou's (2022) research. For example, students who incorporate the pentatonic scale from traditional Chinese music into their compositions not only create distinctive works but also deepen their understanding of Chinese culture.

Exposure to and study of different music genres, such as Western classical music, modern popular music, and other world music genres, significantly enhance students' creative abilities and innovative thinking. This finding is consistent with Bartleet et al.'s (2020) research. For example, a study found that students who learned African drumming integrated

its unique rhythms into their compositions, significantly enhancing the diversity and creativity of their music. However, compared to international studies, this research found that Chinese students still face challenges in accessing diverse music genres due to resource constraints and insufficient curriculum offerings.

Advancements in modern music technology have made the music creation process more convenient and efficient. Research shows that students using music production software experience significant improvements in creative freedom and expressive capabilities, consistent with Cayari's (2021) findings. For example, using DAW software, students can quickly experiment with different sounds and effects, greatly enhancing their creative efficiency.

Integrating knowledge from other disciplines as well as cooperating with other disciplines, for example, art, English, or technology, significantly expands the material student has at their disposal and changes their paradigm of work. Studies definitely indicate that there are numerous advantages to ID learning. It has not only resulted in a significant expansion of students' knowledge sphere but also in the rather intensive development of students' innovative potential. This conclusion is in very good agreement with the findings of Oudenampsen et al. (2023).

Challenges and Strategic Solutions

Although the present study outlined a number of effective practices in teaching and learning as well as a range of sources of creativity that were both varied and rich, the study was also successful in pinpointing a number of significant issues: all the issues with the curriculum; lack of interdisciplinary; lack of integration of technology; and the fact that teachers' philosophies and practices could use improvement. The curriculum at present is not very flexible, and this results in the corresponding limitation of the creative potential of students. This is in line with the observations made by John (2020), where it was established that the application of flexibility in the management of curriculum can go a long way in enhancing the creativity of the students.

One major disadvantage is that there are not many carriers in which students can engage in interdisciplinary learning; hence, the creativity of the students is more or less confined. According to similar studies, more efforts should be made on cooperation and exchange with other disciplines, and there should be more interdisciplinary seminars and related projects held, which can really help expand students' vision and fully awaken their creativity (Mantie, 2023).

In addition, there are deficiencies in the provision and utilization of technological resources in schools, which affects the innovation efficiency of students. This aligns with Kormos's (2022) research. To address this, enhancing the updating and training of technological equipment will enable teachers and students to proficiently use modern technology for creative purposes, significantly improving teaching effectiveness and students' creative abilities. Lastly, some teachers' traditional and inflexible teaching methods limit students' creative development. The research suggests that enhancing professional development and training for teachers, and updating educational philosophies and methods, can better guide students in innovation, consistent with Pimental's (2023) findings.

Conclusion

This study examines the development of creativity in Chinese higher music education in depth. Through the investigation and interview of teachers and students in five universities in Guangzhou, it is clear that traditional teaching methods have a certain importance, innovative teaching methods are the key to activating creativity, and the sources and main obstacles of creativity are pointed out. Finally, suggestions such as flexible teaching strategies, integration of science and technology, interdisciplinary participation and educational reform are put forward to solve obstacles, cultivate outstanding music talents, promote the development of Chinese music education and enhance its international competitiveness.

Funding

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