**Putting the Ego Aside:**
**A case study of the peer-to-peer feedback dialogue among electronic popular music makers within higher education.**

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**Putting the ego aside: A case study of the peer-to-peer feedback dialogue among electronic popular music makers within higher education**

**Abstract:** Settings where students showcase their original songs to peers and teachers can seem advantageous and harmless. However, beneath this surface is a complex, multifaceted negotiation. In this article, I engage with the construction of this complexity. I interviewed eight Norwegian electronic popular music students at the university level on how they experienced the real-time peer group song assessment (PGSA) setting. Through semi-structured interviews, I seek to give a critical view on how PGSA works as a vehicle for learning. I discuss how the student's experience of risk varies according to what the student is presenting and what the feedback focuses on. The interviews indicate that feedback that engages with elements that contain the highest degree of creative and personal investment is the hardest feedback to give and yet most desirable to receive. Appendix I offers suggestions for presenters, peers and teachers related to the PGSA setting.

## Introduction

In the songwriting camps I have attended, as well as masterclasses with songwriters and producers, one saying I have heard numerous times is that ‘one should put the ego aside and do what’s best for the song’. Although this saying seems logical and straightforward at first, I find that it presents several challenges within formal and informal learning settings. In popular music pedagogical practices, these challenges are especially prominent for what I, from hereon, will call peer group song assessment (PGSA). PGSA is a pedagogical event where students present music to classmates and teachers give and receive feedback on student works. In this setting, the teacher(s) chairs the event and should refrain from dominating or taking over the conversation if not required (Bennet 2015; Hill 2019; Anthony 2023).

A central aspect of any performance-based arts education is the expectancy for students to showcase their artistic work to peers and teachers. These events are not only limited to the presentation of artistic works but also contain a discussion about students’ work and performance in the form of feedback from peers and teachers, where the music students showcase often carries a high level of personal and creative investment (Searby and Ewers 1997; Heywood 2000; Gielen et al. 2010; Boucher and Creech 2021). These formative assessment settings are a vehicle for learning in several ways. Firstly, they push students to finish ideas or sketches. Secondly, students learn from each other (Bergee 1993; Lebler 2007; Green 2008; Lebler 2008; Lebler 2013). Thirdly, students may learn from the teacher. Fourth, students may learn by preparing and reflecting upon future projects (Kratus 2013; Hill 2019). However, these settings also require a form of openness from the student, an ability to put the ego aside so it is not standing in the way of their learning (Bennet 2015).

Within popular music performance in higher education, the potential of using peer assessment as a vehicle for learning is almost limitless (Snowball and Mostert 2013; Hanken 2016; Valle et al. 2016; Chen et al. 2017). Feedback, the most significant component in such peer-group learning, moves between the students themselves and between the teacher and the students, using the students' artistic work as an object for discussion. In this sense, feedback is a vector for qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta 2013) for everybody listening, talking or presenting. This feedback offers potential to learn in three ways: (1) The setting can help the students improve their technical craft of music making; (2) It can inform reflections on

aesthetics; (3) It poses potential for meta-learning (Fullan and Langworthy 2014; Fadel et al. 2015), learning how to learn from peers (Tara 2011). Learning from fellow music-makers is crucial for a long career in the arts, where creative collaboration is often the key to success (Hanken 2016). King's (2016) framework for 'studio pedagogy' (2016: 63) emphasizes the entanglement between knowledge and skills for capturing and processing a performance in the studio and the human perspective of evaluating these actions. Similarly, Anthony (2020) discusses how 'studio pedagogy' makes the students accountable to teachers and peers (2020: 50), which forces them to think about how to act and learn from the situation, thus combining (1), (2) and (3).

As educational practices continue to shift towards more student-centered education gradually (Sidelinger and Booth-Butterfield 2010; Fraser et al. 2014) and the utilization of formative peer assessment increases (Birenbaum et al. 2015), I believe there is need for a critical view on this form of teaching. The pitfalls of peer assessment and how to address them have been discussed by several scholars within music education research (Falchikov 2004; Vickerman 2009). Still, there is a potential for more scholarly works that address these pitfalls within music and arts education. I believe this is important due to five factors. Firstly, the compositional turn in music education evident in students' interest in working in an open form, creating rather than reciting (Allsup 2013) enforces the need to engage directly with where the students are and their creative work. Secondly, a rising tendency of individualism and self-blame (Schwartz 2004) may carry an emphasis on artistic originality before the unproductive man (Cook 2018). This tendency has implications for the well-being (Hildebrandt et al. 2012) of the students and teachers, as some are more perfectionistic (Smith et al. 2016) and open to negative experiences (neuroticism) than others (Madsen and Duke 1985; Patston 2014; Sauer-Zavala et al. 2017). Thirdly, studies on peer mentoring and self-assessment indicate that students' self-evaluation correlates poorly with teacher and peer evaluation (Bergee and Cecconi-Roberts 2002; Napoles 2008). Fourth, popular music's tendency to value music that contains 'autobiographical elements' (Dibben 2006: 173). Here Dibben puts forward an important notion. With music that contains lyrics and voice within the domain of popular music, an important and perhaps default mode of interpretation is the act of trying to trace the lyrical delivery towards the self of the writer. It is naïve to assume that this default mode of interpretation is not also active when the students make their own music and give feedback on others music. Thus, pedagogical settings that seeks to engage with this vulnerability on display, that focuses on the students own artistic project with lyrics written and perhaps performed by the students, may carry a higher degree of risk than settings of peer-to-peer feedback on constrained based compositional tasks.

An increasing risk towards the self for the students reaffirms the demands on the environment to accommodate the creative personal investment on display (Evans and Ryan 2022: 587). Furthermore, one should at least entertain the idea that feedback also has a potential for negative learning. Mike Howlett indicates this in his PhD thesis: 'From previous experience I had seen quite capable artists—not just singers, but musicians of any instrument lose their ability and become progressively worse, entirely because the wrong word of criticism was used' (2009: 83-84). Therefore, a situational teaching style (Raza and Sikandar 2018) that adapts to the situation is critical for the performance of the PGSA. Fifth, by operationalized feedback within a group learning setting where 'every member of a group is integrally involved in a task which, without their particular input, would disintegrate' (Green 2008: 119-120) 'gamifies' the nature of feedback and thus incentivizes a form of behavior (Dichev and Dicheva 2017) that does not

automatically align with the students' long-term needs. These five factors contribute to the social construction of risk in the PGSA setting.

Still, it is important to recognize that one should be wary of seeking to remove any risk in education. Biesta argues: 'The desire to make education strong, secure, predictable and risk-free is in a sense an attempt to wish this reality away' (2013: 2). According to Biesta (2018), education that focuses on the student's creative expression needs to have events where the students artistic expressions get responses from peers and teachers. Biesta also emphasizes that these responses should engage with the artwork and how the art relates to the world and themselves, as 'expression itself is never enough' (2018: 14). One way to approach the complexities of the PGSA setting is by investigating the student's experience of this setting and how this experience impacts student learning. This line of thought yields two research questions:

1. How do electronic music students experience giving and receiving feedback in real-time on the student's own music in a peer group setting?
2. What implications do these experiences have on the learning outcome?

In this article, I will outline a theoretical frame by contextualizing formative assessment as a learning approach when teaching and learning music-making. After the theoretical frame, I will present a thematic analysis of the interviews. Based on these findings, I will discuss the learning goals of the PGSA before concluding and give pointers to further research.

**Formative assessment as a learning approach**

There are several approaches to teaching popular music-making. I will list seven here: (1) Repertoire analysis, (2) formative assessment, (3) constrained-based tasks (Bennet 2015), (4) practice, (5) inside accounts from released material with books such as (Massey 2000; Zollo 2003) or more general books related to the process itself (Pattison 2010), (6) learning about creativity itself in the form of meta-learning (Tara 2011; McIntyre et al. 2018: 147) and (7) lectures where the teacher or students gives examples from their artistic processes. Naturally, it is possible or even preferable to combine these approaches. So, what type of learning approach is PGSA? I view PGSA as a learning approach driven primarily by formative assessment. Bennett (2015) and Hill (2019) conclude similarly. However, it is worth remembering that more approaches are active in the PGSA setting. The student may very well show music resulting from constrained-based tasks and equally, ask the students to reflect upon the process and the artwork compared to the repertoire in the course. Arguably, it is not hard to find aspects of all the seven approaches in the PGSA setting. This leads to an important question: *What should the goal of formative assessment be*?

In their review of the literature on formative assessment, Black and Williams (1998) argue that formative assessment's primary role is facilitating feedback between teachers and students. They define feedback as any information provided to the performer of any action, where the feedback does not have to come from an external source or relate to a form of reference. Kluger & DeNisi (1996) differ from Black & William's definition of feedback, as the feedback has to link to an expected performance or standard. Their meta-analysis focuses on the effect of feedback on performance, where feedback is an instrument to decrease the gap between expected performance and actual performance. In their feedback intervention theory, they call these gaps feedback-standard-gaps. Kluger and DeNisi's literature review problematizes feedback and the number of studies that have not found a positive relation between feedback and

performance. They conclude that the effectiveness of feedback increases when it focuses on the task and less on the self. Perrenoud (1998), on the other hand, is critical towards equating formative assessment and feedback. He argues for an expanded conceptual approach to formative assessment, seeing feedback as only a part that relates to the overall learning experience.

The emotional experience of music listening is challenging to report in scientific terms. The disentanglement between the song, its performer and its author, perhaps necessary for an effective feedback environment, should be considered anything but trivial. However, this does not negate the findings of Kluger and Denisi. Instead, it argues for the complexities of formative assessment within art education. Perrenoud critique of a narrow instrumental view of formative setting emphasizes the PGSA's potential for learning as it expands way beyond the specific songs the songs the students showcase. Through continental educational philosophy (Bildung), PGSA may be viewed as a vehicle for self-formation (Retter 2012: 284; Siljander and Sutinen 2012). For example, the feedback may interface with the students' general musical development. Additionally, students may experience meta-learning, learning about the social feedback process and how they can learn from settings such as these.

**Method**

Unpacking students' experience of the PGSA setting and its many layers of complexities required a qualitative methodological approach. I utilized semi-structured interviews (Kvale 2007). I used interview data from a previous study on how electronic music students experienced making contemporary popular music in the DAW environment (Sørbø and Røshol 2020). In this study, I used unstructured interviews and probe questions (Kvale 2007). These interviews ended up engaging with multiple subjects too vast for one article. The feedback topic was therefore omitted and structured as an own study, resulting in this article. I also interviewed two female electronic music students, as the first study lacked a female perspective.

My interest in the topic emerged through pedagogical practice as a student and a teacher. I modeled the interview guide after observation and personal experience (Kawulich 2005). By doing so, I achieved a level of detail that, in some of the answers, would have been impossible without being an informed insider (Trotter et al. 2015: 665-667). I have extensive experience from both leading the PGSA settings, being a student-presenter and being an accomplished music-maker in the electronic music domain. The confirmation bias for me as a researcher was active from all these angles. Therefore, one should not overlook my impact on the interview data's preparation, organization and reporting (Elo et al. 2014). I collected, stored and managed all the data following the Norwegian Center of Research Data guidelines. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Norwegian.

After transcribing the interviews, I used Norton's (2009) thematic analysis, supported by Kvale's (2007) content analysis, to decode two general themes. After transcribing the interview word for word, I made an own document for each interview, where I started to mark and code the students' answers. During the stage of immersion and the first read-throughs of the transcription, I used binary coding, marking responses and dialogues that seemed relevant to the topic of feedback informed by a grounded theory approach (Norton 2009: 116) that emphasizes the experience (McCarthy and Wright 2007: 54) of the PGSA setting. After this initial read-through, I wrote down a short summary for each interview through the form of bullet-points. These summaries contained my initial response, questions and aspects to look for in the other interviews. Each interview created categories through these summaries. Following Norton's

(2009: 118-121) steps, I generated numerous categories before deleting, merging and linking them into themes. I ended up with four underlying categories in Theme A. Theme B had two underlying categories. For the sake of presentation, I have called these categories for factors to emphasize how these categories affect the themes themselves. I present examples on research questions and excerpts from the interviews in Appendix II.

**Context:**

All interview objects were from the same department, the Department of Popular Music (DPM) at the University of Agder, Norway. I interviewed only electronic popular music students.

I am a full-time Assistant Professor at DPM, teaching electronic popular music performance subjects. I conducted the interviews during my first years as a PhD research fellow at DPM. I interviewed two first-year students, one second-year student, two third-year students on the bachelor level, one first-year student and two second-year master students. Two of the eight respondents were female students.

One category that was only partially addressed in the study was the relationship between feedback relevance, group skill level, psychological safety and PGSA frequency. Participant Eight addressed this somewhat while problematizing the constructed nature of the PGSA setting and how it required students to say something more as an exercise 'to say something' than to give relevant feedback. In my summary of the interview from Participant Eight, I further problematized the degree to which the PGSA setting with the same students and teachers could repeatedly manage to create new and novel feedback data. Although the psychological safety of the group might increase during the semester, the probability of new relevant feedback data would decrease as the potency of 'new' perspectives and 'new voices' decreased. I omitted this from the study, although this might be an important observation. The reason is partially due to scope, partially due to the complexities of the argumentation required to discuss this observation and partially due to lack of interview data to support it.

I have previously studied for a bachelor's and master's in electronic popular music performance at DPM. Some of the interview objects on the master level were, therefore, ex-classmates who had previously been studying one grade below me. At the time of the interviews, I had taught arranging and composition in electronic popular music for the second-year students the last two years. Therefore, the second-year student was currently in my class, whereas the two third-year students had finished my course last year. I randomized the selection for the male respondents across bachelor and master levels. I did not randomize the selection for female respondents. My reason was that, at that time, only two female students were in the program at the bachelor's and master's levels. Every student I asked said yes to participating. The interview length varied from 30 minutes (4600 words) to 72 minutes (8984 words). The average word length for the interviews was 6791 words.

At DPM, a PGSA session for the electronic music student consists of listening to a production with a following verbal feedback dialogue relating to this production. The compositions can be the product of a specific task or a more open setting where the students can decide what they want to present. The PGSA setting is incorporated as an own event (feedback session) and as part of different classes focusing on music making. Although the teacher leads the dialogue, the teacher does not necessarily speak more than the typical student.

Most electronic music students at the Department of Popular Music (DPM) think of themselves as producers and artists. Their definition of the producer role seems to be an overarching definition that encompasses a multitude of roles such as songwriting, sound design

mixing and mastering in a process they call production (Partti 2014; Watson 2014: 36; Røshol and Sørbø 2020). This definition does not conform to the more traditional view of the producer as a facilitator (Burgess 2013) or the producer as a nexus (Howlett 2009). These types of students are what Burgess calls artist producers (2013: 9) and what adam patrick bell discusses as the self-producing artist (2018: 50). Another way of understanding the types of students is through the roles of trackers, tracker-artists or tracker-topliner-artists. Meaning that the students either program and produce music for others (trackers), program and produce music and release it under their own artist alias without their own topline/vocals (tracker-artists) or with their own topline/vocals (tracker-topliner-artists)[1]. In this sense, their creative radius (Toynbee 2000: 40) might encompass more aspects associated with the producer than the songwriter role (Røshol and Sørbø 2020: 172).

In the PGSA setting, the students present a production of a song intended for their own artist project. The students tend to choose material they have a high degree of personal and creative investment towards, meaning their music. This form of pedagogical practice might help to put the students' development at the core of the curriculum (Brinck and Anderskov 2019: 151). Though live performance is also welcomed, the students tend to present their recorded songs. The class size at DPM is around 10 – 20 students. If multiple classes attend, students might range from 20 to 50. Room for the events varies from the studio facility to larger rooms with PA systems at campus. The student's experience of music-making varies depending on their class and age. However, the students are all working towards a desired artistic expression. Many have experience releasing their own material, whereas a few have garnered international attention.

**Findings**

Two main themes emerged in the thematic analysis. Formulated as questions, these are:

A. What influences the students' learning in the PGSA setting?
B. How does the students' experience of risk vary according to what the student is presenting and what the feedback focuses on?

Theme A focused on factors that affected how the PGSA setting worked as a vehicle for learning. In addition, the interview objects had numerous reflections regarding how the experience of interpersonal risk-taking affected their experience of the PGSA setting. Due to the interview data's frequency and scope on interpersonal risk-taking, I categorized this as a theme outside of A. Interpersonal risk-taking is facilitated by a sense of confidence that peers and teachers will not reject, embarrass or punish the student-presenter due to mutual respect and trust (Johnson et al. 2020: 560). Johnson et al. (2020) argue that increasing psychological safety might transform feedback conversations so that 'learners might honestly reflect on their performance, explain their reasoning, reveal their difficulties, ask questions, propose their own ideas for improvement or contest educators' comments' (560). Theme A and B were, therefore, highly entangled as the student learning in the PGSA setting depends on a degree of psychological safety that affords interpersonal risk-taking.

**The first theme: What influences students' learning in the PGSA setting?**

The students discussed four factors that affected their learning experience in the PGSA setting:

1. Their overall opinion of the PGSA setting.

2. Where in the creative process the song is situated.
3. The relevance of the dialogue itself and what it addresses for the student-presenter.
4. The credibility and knowledge the student has of the musical genre in question.

The first factor concerned the students' overall opinion of the PGSA setting. In addition to its formative nature, where the feedback engages with the music itself, some students highlighted the social qualities of the PGSA setting.

> *Participant Seven:* I think it is good for the class or the group to train on giving feedback. It is also interesting to hear what my classmates have been working on and through these settings, we also get to know each other.

As one might suspect, the students had a double-edged relationship with feedback. The students admit it is scary to show their music while acknowledging that receiving feedback is part of the songwriter profession. In addition, a few students recognize the constructed nature of the PGSA setting:

> *Participant Eight:* If you want to be professional and do it for a living, you are going to get comments on how it sounds and you are going to get reviews, but you are not going to sit in a room with five people and get feedback. That's a constructed situation.

For many students, the PGSA remained a challenging setting throughout their studies. I found little coherence in the interview data that the experience of discomfort and risk decreased as the students became more versed in the PGSA setting. While a first-year student emphasized that one should not take the music too seriously and that not everybody had to love it, a third-year student had a different tone in their reflection:

> *Participant Two:* I feel that people take their music too seriously. That their music is their lifework and everyone has to love it, that the music has to be perfect.

> *Participant One:* I don't like to show my music. If it is because I am not happy with it or embarrassed by it, I don't know (…). Honestly, I think I mostly become more frustrated than motivated. That's probably the reason why I don't show my music to a lot of other people.

While many students acknowledge the social and motivational aspect of hearing others' music, they seem to concur that the main objective of the PGSA setting is to verbalize feedback that can improve the song-making skills of either themselves or their peers. Individuals who load high on the personality trait of agreeableness (Graziano and Tobin 2009) might be more likely to shape both themselves and their music following the consensus in the group.

> *Participant Four:* Feedback affects me more than I would wish for. I am a very suggestible person, which often makes me forget my own voice (…) It is difficult to know the agenda behind the feedback, if they want to sculpt me in a direction that they would like better or if it is meant more genuinely towards how it can be as best as

> possible. (…) When one gives feedback, one is a form of a producer. Do you want to direct it toward your vision or their vision? A similar challenge occurs when producing for others: Whose vision is it really?

The reflections offered by participant four above also indicate aspects of meta-learning. More specifically, how loading high on agreeableness can filter, block or shape the aesthetic artifacts one seeks to bring into existence. In this sense, becoming aware of the consequence of loading high on agreeableness can be viewed as meta-learning. In this context, meta-learning might help foster an ability to resist peer pressure and help the students create a space where freedom can appear (Biesta 2013: 113) so that the students will refrain from walking away from what the world is asking of them (Apple et al. 2022: 248).

The second factor relates to where in the creative process the song is situated. The students agree that the timing of the feedback is important (Hattie and Timperley 2007). Feedback too early in the process is not always relevant when it focuses on elements that are not yet developed. Many students talk about a flow or bubble early in the process and how feedback at this stage might disrupt and hinder this flow. Therefore, feedback toward musical elements is primarily relevant when the musical idea starts to take a form that can communicate the music maker's overall intention.

> *Participant Eight:* It is something about being in that bubble and zone, that loving feeling where nobody has heard it and you think: 'This the best music I have made!' (Laughs a bit). Then you show it to someone and reality hits you quite hard. It is easy to think I should have waited a bit when that happened.

The third factor concerns the relevance of the dialogue. The feedback is not always relevant. If the conversation centers around topics the receiver of feedback finds irrelevant, the learning outcome decreases substantially.

> *Participant Eight:* In a recent feedback session where I played a production live, we discussed whether I should have a laptop on the stage. That was not something I wanted to discuss at all. (…) Sometimes, the feedback dialogue can be obsessive on a detail that does not matter.

A few students emphasized the importance of centering the discussion on the song itself.

> *Participant Seven:* If all the students in the dialogue can keep the feedback grounded (…) so, it is not a regurgitation of what someone else said concerning the previous song. If I get that type of feedback from someone, the credibility of that feedback decreases. (…) One should be able to keep the feedback within a shared reality, where one can disagree but still use relevant technical expressions and communicate understandably.

Keeping the feedback 'grounded' calls for competencies in verbalizing technical, aesthetical and emotional responses. But perhaps more importantly, how these interact.

The fourth factor concerns how the student's knowledge and skills impact feedback relevance. Multiple respondents emphasized this factor as crucial when considering the significance of the feedback. Several students stressed the question of whether the person giving

feedback had an overview and understanding of the field of released material the music is in dialogue with:

> *Participant Three:* I think listening to varied music and trying to understand it is important. I think this could facilitate more interesting discussions. (…) I am particularly interested in which musical references you hear when you listen.

**The second theme – What factors influence the students' experience of risks while giving and receiving feedback?**

Relating to the students' experience of risk, the interview unpacked two main factors:

1. What type of music were the students asked to play?
2. What kind of musical elements was the feedback dialogue directed towards?

Firstly, most students agreed that the type of music they showcased shaped their experience of risk. The experience of risk declined if the music resulted from a constrained-based task outside their artistic project's domain. Equally, the experience of risk declined if the music resulted from a collaboration. However, one student did not differentiate between experience of risk depending on the tasks or collaboration. The student also seemed to feel that the school setting did not decrease but instead increased the experience of risk:

> *Participant One:* It doesn't matter if it is my original songs, remakes or remixes. It is still something I have done, you know? (…) It is worse in school settings.

How the musical production afforded the students artistic agency was proportional to the experience of risk. All but participant one had this reflection. One way of understanding how artistic agency ties to the experience of risk can be through the metaphor of personal investment. One of the students used the term personal investment when discussing their experience of risk within the PGSA setting:

> *Participant Eight:* By personal investment, I mean if you have written a song that conveys an emotion that means much for you or did mean a lot when you wrote it. If you have to show that for five people, that becomes difficult. (…) It is more difficult to show your own music.

Secondly, the experience of risk tied to what musical elements the feedback dialogue focused on and the role attributed to shaping this element. The students each seemed to have an individual hierarchy of what types of feedback were important and irrelevant to give and receive. This hierarchy was tied directly to their experience of risk.

> *Participant Eight:* It is more personal for me if someone comments negatively on the vocal or the lyrics. Not because I have 100% confidence in either production, songwriting, vocals or lyrics, but because vocals and lyrics can be the most personal of them. It can also be challenging because I have not studied popular vocal performance. Initially, I felt vulnerable in a setting where these students were present.

In addition to the complex relationship between the identification of roles and the expectations towards self and the surroundings, there were indications in the interviews that there were musical elements that transcend as more personal. Overall, the students all agreed that the lyrics were something personal that they deferred from commenting on as lyrics were 'too personal.'

> *Participant Five:* It is no problem giving feedback on a mix, but giving feedback and critique on the lyrics to people; I don't like doing that because it is their business, not mine. (…) I might give feedback on the vocal performance, but that is touchier than the mix, right?

It might be easy to disagree with this idea of lyrics as too personal. Firstly, it builds upon the romanticized notion of the creative process of songwriting (McIntyre 2006) that can and perhaps should be challenged inside the classroom. Secondly, lyrics as 'too personal' can be considered socially prescribed. The 'tall-poppy-syndrome' and the mentality of 'cutting down those who stick their neck out' (Cappelen and Dahlberg 2018: 420) varies according to Cappelen and Dahlberg, not only between countries but also on the county level in Norway (2018: 431). A mentality of modesty that 'frowns on showing off' (2018: 421) might filter behavior that questions the lyrical design, especially if the individual giving feedback has less experience in writing lyrics than the presenter. Thirdly, electronic popular music students might identify more with the producer than the songwriter role. Therefore, they might feel less comfortable and know less about writing and critiquing lyrics than students who focus more on songwriting. One might expect a different response if one, for example, interviews songwriting students who focus more on lyrical design in their curriculum. Using semi-structured interviews, Lefford and Johansson (2019) investigate the students' understanding of the producer role. Like the interview objects in this study, their respondents 'expressed hesitance to discuss lyric interpretation or interfere with vocal performances, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of lyrics' (2019: 367). Fourth, there is a general tendency for many of the Norwegian students to write their lyrics in English. Writing and critiquing lyrics in a non-native language probably affects the experience of critiquing lyrics. I did not pursue this difference during the interviews.

**Discussion**

The students want relevant feedback, which can be summarized as: Timed at the perfect balance where the students have emerged from a creative process of music making and are somewhat unsure of what to focus on next, feedback that is based on the music itself and the body of works it is in dialogue with, feedback that is founded on an experience where the suggested changes are contextualized with relevant technical terms – while still taking the artistic intention behind it seriously, where the dialogue is not side cornered into a topic more appropriate for the peers than themselves. On the personal level, the relevance of the feedback is tied to a hierarchy of investment for both the sender and receiver of feedback. All of these aspects are markers of the quality of the feedback dialogue. Feedback concerning roles and musical structures considered more personal carries the highest experience of risk and the highest reward. However, the ideal is not necessarily to strive for the most intimate and direct form of dialogue but a dialogue adapted to the individual and the group, similar to what (Hill 2019) argues. On the individual level, this threshold relates to a scale of perfectionism, whereas on the group level, this threshold relates to the shared belief of how safe the group is for interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson 2019). Recognizing all these aspects, some of the students discuss the PGSA setting as constructed and, in many ways, fails to serve as a predictable and effective medium for meaningful feedback that can contribute to developing their music-making capabilities and thus challenges the goal of the PGSA setting as a formative vehicle for learning. However, the interviews point towards other relevant learning outcomes. Including both former and latter aspects, they can be listed as:

a) To train the students to verbalize and discuss musical structure and the individual aesthetic experience of such structure.
b) To motivate and socialize the students through events where students can showcase what they are working on.
c) To train the students in giving and receiving feedback.
d) To help the students develop their music-making craftmanship.
e) To train the students to showcase their music.

I find few arguments for why the PGSA setting should focus on a). This goal is better pursued when focusing on released musical material with a 'high standard.' Doing so can bypass the students' egos and give them room to properly focus on understanding the musical structure. By concentrating on the released material, the students can reflect upon their aesthetic experience of the music and relate it to the musical structure without fear of stepping on anyone's toes. *In many ways, it is questionable to utilize the student's music as a tool to learn how to speak about the music itself.*

Similarly, I find d) problematic as the student forum is just that; students and the impact of their feedback from a peer or a close friend is often disproportional with relevance. Students and teachers might often be on the wrong side of the Dunning-Kruger effect (1999), speaking confidently on matters they know too little to understand what they do not know. This aspect can manifest through little knowledge of the body of works the music is in dialogue with or vast simplifications of the song's inherent musical quality and further artistic directions. Conversely, this challenge depends on the student's skill and degree of artistic and creative maturity, a problem that should be less relevant at a master's than a bachelor's level. Another argument for negative learning within the PGSA setting is that the individual can choose to listen or not listen to the feedback. This argument builds upon a mechanical perspective on feedback that many wish to be true, which carries a similar logic that 'being' extroverted or introverted is a choice. Tynan Sylvester (2016) presents this mechanical argument clearly in a panel discussion on the process of managing and designing computer games and how to deal with feedback from players during early access:

> I mean, people are very good at this naturally. Your brain will sort of automatically learn by sampling a wide range of data, what are the things that come up over and over, what are the things that just came up once and you don't actually have to worry about. And that saves you from focusing on something that is coming from just like one person who's close to you or someone who happens to be really loud. So, consuming a large volume and then there's just, consume a lot of it and think about it and it will, things will pop out to you that come up over and over (2016: 10:42 - 11:07)

Arguably, this idea mentioned above of rationality, where one effectively puts the ego aside, is challenging for social beings engaging towards something they are creative and personally invested in. This idea is perhaps especially true for perfectionistic individuals who load high on consciousness and neuroticism (Hill et al. 1997; Stoeber 2012), individuals who want to impress the institution or their teacher and are more open to negative emotions. Teachers and peers expect the students to inject part of themselves into the music they make, which in many ways confirms the romanticized notion of creativity (Frith 2012: 67; Cook 2018: 206). *This aspect means that if teachers and peers want the students to care about the music they write,*

*encouraging them to 'inject' their personality into the music they make, one should not be surprised if they also become fragile in situations where this music is on display.*

There were no indications in the interviews in this study that more seasoned students experienced the setting as less threatening towards the self. The demands towards the self seem to increase as they progress in the program. *As the students' artistic and creative vocabulary increases, so does their flexibility to imprint their creative and personal signature in the music they display to their peers. The increased discomfort could, therefore, be a symptom of the student's artistic and creative development as they progress in the program.*

The constructed nature of the PGSA setting as a formative vehicle of learning might become even more constructed if one expects every student to say something, herby succumbing to the risk of sacrificing relevance for the student in question so that every student can train to give and verbalize feedback. On the other hand, the interviews indicate a negative relationship between feedback frequency (Hill 2019) and feedback relevance. Therefore, the teacher chairing the session might seek to curate the dialog, inviting students with something relevant to say that haven't yet voiced their opinion while challenging voices that gradually become too dominant.

**Conclusion**

The PGSA setting is perhaps one of the most feasible ways to keep students engaged. After all, it is their music, so it concerns them directly. *However, student engagement should not be mistaken for student learning*. If the students have not been taught how to speak about the musical structure, its perceived aesthetics in relation to a field of similar works and how to verbalize their emotional response, nor learned to differentiate between these three aspects in their feedback, *one cannot expect the feedback to be relevant as a vehicle to develop the student's music making*. However, PGSA is well suited for training the students to give and receive feedback and socializing the students. Teachers should not underestimate the latter, especially if the students specialize in an instrument that affords solitary creative processes (Røshol and Sørbø 2020; Sørbø and Røshol 2020).

Negotiation of the self (and the ego) is vital for all participants in the PGSA setting. Equally to the presenter and the teacher chairing the session, the peers giving feedback should avoid the temptation of approaching the act of giving and receiving feedback from a position of strength and thus as a means of asserting themselves. On the one hand, normative and judgmental feedback can be used to establish dominance and thereby reduce overall psychological safety. On the other hand, feedback in the form of neutral questions driven by curiosity for the presenter and the music at hand can ensure that descriptive feedback accounts for the intended properties of the work (Anderskov forthcomming 2024: 26)[2]. In this sense, it is not only about leading the class through Kratus's (2013: 277-278) stages of feedback (generic, positive, descriptive and prescriptive) but also about challenging the students' desire for the prescriptive pivot (Hill 2019: 149). I believe this gravitation towards the prescriptive pivot relates to how some aspects are easier to discuss. For example, mixing interfaces more easily with the system of language and acts of engineering than more abstract concepts, such as the work's intended aesthetic effect.

Scholars might investigate the PGSA setting further concerning aspects such as age and the student's maturity. Although the interview uncovered a few findings about gender, the dataset should be expanded if one seeks to unpack the degree to which the PGSA setting is gendered, a setting in which non-male genders are highly underrepresented in music technology related programs (Armstrong 2011; Björck 2021; D'Errico 2022). Future research should also investigate the experience of giving and receiving feedback on the student's own music when

applying written feedback asynchronously. Situations where students are not providing feedback to another student in the same room right after they have showcased their music but instead are given a deadline and musical material to listen to in their own time. Equally, emphasizing written instead of verbal feedback through the synchronous PGSA settings is worth investigating further. I speculate that popular music education might privilege extroverted students in many ways, where the immediate verbal response sets the stage for the feedback dialogue, albeit not always in a relevant direction.

An overall challenge relating to music education that centers on performance and music-making is the fallacy of a direct link between the skill of verbalization and description and the skill of performance. *Talking about it does not necessarily mean you become better at it.* Therefore, one should be aware of turning events that focus on the music, towards events that focus on the skillful use of language. After all, music is an embodied experience, either in performance or in listening. Often, the best and most relevant feedback does not lie in the words themselves (Goodrich et al. 2018: 31). I present suggestions for the presenter, their peers and the teacher chairing the session in Appendix 1.

[1] For the tracker/topliner dichotomy see (Auvinen 2020), (Bell 2019) and (Røshol and Sørbø 2020).

[2] Here I am referencing the 1st edition of the KUA Compendium (forthcomming) authored by Jacob Anderskov from Rhythmic Music Conservatory in Copenhagen that concerns peer-driven discussions on the student's artistic development. Per personal correspondence with Anderskov on 26th September 2023, the second edition will be publicly available and published online soon.

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**Appendix 1 – A few suggestions to student-presenters, peers and teachers when conducting formative peer assessment of student's original music.**

**Suggestions to individuals showing music:**

Remember: Never overestimate the ability of others to understand your musical intention, their ability to correctly attribute their experience towards elements within the music or different degrees of finalization. Therefore, seek to showcase music in a state where it is able to communicate its fundamental ideas:

a) State your intention: Why are you showcasing this song in particular? Where in the creative process is the song currently situated?
b) Contextualize within a body of released works: What musical references have informed the music-making process? In which settings is the music intended to be listened to?
c) Present limitations and frame for the dialogue: If possible, give insights into your hierarchy of investment. What roles and musical structures are vital for you?
d) Do not compromise potential fresh ears: Do not deflate your song before your peers have heard it by describing its weaknesses or specific parts you are uncertain of. Let them judge for themselves and discuss after.
e) Give yourself room and space to control the situation: If necessary, ask for clarifications and challenge the logic of the feedback.

**Suggestions to individuals who are giving feedback:**

Remember: There are three levels of peers. The first level is saying something for their own sake. The second level is saying something for the presenter's sake. The third level requires the ability to determine the feedback's potential to align with the presenter's intention. The third level requires the ability to either *withhold* or *shape* the feedback so its point of departure is situated within the current version of the compositional design and directed towards the presenter's 'desired space of interpretation.'

a) Clarify your position:
    i. How do you interpret the presenter's aesthetic intention?
    ii. You can also reflect upon the relationship between functionality and desired aesthetic effect: What do you feel the music is trying to achieve? What kind of effect does it seek to produce?
b) Clarify your knowledge:
    i. What kind of music, styles or genres do you know that share similarities to the presented music?
    ii. How do you understand the presenter's intention to be in dialogue with this music?

c) Mind your intention: Seek to give feedback that follows the student's desired frame of dialogue.
d) Read your peer before engaging: If it is proper to be direct, address the song on display directly. If you want to decrease the impact, avoid the present. Instead, talk about ideas for future songs or aspects from previous songs the student has showcased.
e) Give constructive positive feedback: What aspects of the musical structures contribute to the student's intention?
f) Share a few suggestions: What changes can help the musical structure be more meaningful to the student's intention? If you can, contextualize your recommendations. How do these changes relate to the body of related released musical work?
g) If it is called for, give advice: Comment on the student's intention itself and the overall artistic direction. Is the aesthetic direction relevant to the aesthetic effect the presenter seeks? Contextualize alternative directions or different categories of aesthetic ideals in relation to a body of released musical work.

**Suggestions to teachers chairing the session:**

Remember: Your role is situational, moving from a passive observer to a strict controller. Do not underestimate your influence on how the conversation flows.

a) Don't be afraid to challenge: The presenter might hesitate to state their intentions. The feedback from peers might be uncalled for, unconstructive or unclear.
b) Steer if needed: Often, the feedback can deviate from the frame of dialogue, away from what the presenter wants feedback on, towards topics its peers are knowledgeable and invested in.
c) It is okay to stay silent at first: Similarly, as your students, your knowledge of the musical field of question can be narrow or another student can potentially voice your thoughts. Give them room to flourish.
d) Look for gold: Be patient and create a frame of discussion where it is needed. Often, important themes or feedback require a bit of nurture and focus. Perhaps the person giving feedback is unclear or the peers or the presenter does not understand it initially.
e) Time is short: Be impatient and a driver for effectiveness. Don't let the same student voice their feedback repeatedly or let the group obsess over small details.
f) If they don't ask: Seldom are students interested in their teacher's personal history or experience. Focus on the music and the student in question.
g) Be fair: Seek to allocate the same amount of time and focus to each student. Do not succumb to the temptation of generalization towards a universal theme relevant to all students. Focus on the student at hand equally.
h) Avoid aesthetic hierarchies: If you are not a professional A&R, do not equate your evaluation with the field of professional taste-makers. You are primarily a teacher and

can not assess the music's commercial viability. Refuting the temptation to assess is equally important for commercial and non-commercial musical expression. If necessary, challenge the group to ensure a neutral aesthetic hierarchy.

i) You can summarize the discussion shortly at the end: Seek to land the debate and give an overview of aspects that were and weren't discussed so that you, the presenter, the peers and the group can learn.

Additional comment for teachers: The different music-making roles shape and' govern' musical elements differently. If a peer comments about too much reverb on the lead vocal, the statement relates to the mixer role. In contrast, if another peer comments on the same song about the pronunciation of the lyrics, that comment relates more to the vocal performance role. *However, both comments can relate to the same experience, the challenge of hearing the lyrics, but with different suggestions for addressing the problem.* The 'illusion of separation' - thinking that one can mentally deconstruct the compositional design, separate and deduce how each musical element contributes to the overall aesthetic effect – is a dangerous fallacy. Thus, starting with the experience before suggesting changes might be preferable. Using the abovementioned example, one should perhaps start with the experience of not hearing the lyrics *before* discussing changes that can alter the experience in a desired direction. Now, depending on the degree to which the presenter identifies with either the mixer or vocal performer role, this identification affects the experience of risk and the relative emotional impact of the feedback. Nonetheless, I see no indications in my teaching practice or the interviews that this relationship is easily described or decoded. In my opinion, the best way of addressing this complexity is through the lens of what the individual expects from themselves and their surroundings. Suppose peers perceive the individual as more of an artist and vocalist than a mixer. In that case, one might suspect that feedback on pronunciation carries greater risk towards the individual than the mix. However, the individual's expectations towards themselves might not always be evident. Perhaps the individual has been working tirelessly to master the mix, a role that does not come as easy for that individual as the vocal performance. Finally, different forums carry different expectations that inform the socially constructed experience of risk. Showcasing something with vocals might be more daring in a PGSA setting with an audience of vocalists than with an audience of guitarists.

**Appendix 2 – Examples of interview questions**

**Excerpts from the interview guide:**

1. Do you often share your music with others?
2. How do you experience receiving feedback on your own music?
    a. What conditions make it easier?
        i. Examples of conditions that can be discussed in follow-up discussions: Space and facilities, individuals involved, number of people, the teacher and number of teachers, the aspects of feedback, the stage of the song in the process, what the feedback focuses on. The degree of collaboration in the process that led to the music.
    b. What conditions make it more challenging?
3. How do you experience giving feedback on others' music?
    a. What conditions make it easier?
    b. What conditions make it more challenging?
4. How honest do you perceive the feedback dialogue to be?
    a. What do you think is an ideal balance?
5. Are there aspects of your musical expression that you feel are more important than others?
    a. How is it to give and receive feedback on them?
6. How do you feel about giving and receiving feedback outside of a pedagogical setting?
7. Is receiving feedback on original songs different from remixes or remakes?
8. Is giving feedback on original songs different from remixes or remakes?
9. Do you see any patterns in how feedback influences the way you work?
    a. How does feedback affect your motivation?
10. What do you think about feedback situations where students share their own music?
    a. Is this something that helps students?

**Excerpts from transcribed dialogue from the interviews (translated by the author):**

**Example 1:**

Interviewee: They usually say: Yes, it sounds like you've found your thing or style, but I think people say that when they feel when they hear something new in this context. If you have people who have been studying vocal performance for three years, they haven't realized that there's a whole genre of this type of music. You have to consider who's making the comments. Songwriting is personal, not just lyrics and melody; it is a unique style you create. So, giving feedback on someone's songwriting is also personal because they've created that kind of melody. They have that kind of flow. It is their choice.

Interviewer: Do you comment on lyrics, for example?

Interviewee: Rarely.

Interviewer: Do you receive comments on lyrics? How does that feel?

Interviewee: Sometimes. If it is very specific, it can be uncomfortable. It is embarrassing if you have grammatical errors in English; it can be uncomfortable for that reason, but it is constructive and it is better to know before you release the song. It is challenging. So, when I had to comment on something two weeks ago, I didn't comment on the lyrics because they were so immature. There was more room for improvement and it felt like the person should figure it out themselves.

Interviewer: If you had received that comment when you were the one presenting, would you have been more or less motivated to work on the lyrics or is it better if you discovered it yourself?

Interviewee: I think it is better to discover it myself.

Interviewer: To discover it yourself, you might need a certain level of expertise, so maybe you have gone through a phase where people commented and then it doesn't happen the next time, right?

Interviewee: Yes, that's true, but for me, it is more like a feeling that: Okay, this was a first draft, I record a version, listen to it, let the song mature. Then I can make changes. By that point, I've heard it myself. I've figured it out myself. It is not necessary for someone to actually say it. But yes, I don't get motivated to continue with a song if someone says it is not working. I just think, I don't want to bother with this (laughs a bit).

**Example 2:**

Interviewer: Earlier, you mentioned that songwriting, lyrics and vocals were difficult to receive feedback on. If you turn that around, what are the things that are difficult to give feedback on?

Interviewee: The same things.

Interviewer: If you set aside all the noise and unnecessary feedback and think about the feedback that has actually been valuable to you, what has that feedback touched on? Not just constructively but also meaningfully.

Interviewee: I might feel that comments on the expression, the artistic aspect, if those comments are good, it is very motivating. Because it confirms that what I'm working on is right.

Interviewer: So, it is a kind of understanding of what you're doing? It means a lot when you feel that what you're presenting is ‘understood’ from an aesthetic point of view?

Interviewee: Yes, I think so. But also, I like it when it is positive.

Interviewer: But is that the same as the feedback we're talking about?

Interviewee: In other words, I just like positive feedback (laughs a bit).

Interviewer: But I don't think you do, based on what you're saying. I imagine it like this: Very cool, this makes me think of this, is this the direction you want to go? Based on that, you should maybe consider these things to get there. So, you kind of agree with my perception of your artistic vision because it is something similar and based on that, you buy into the feedback I'm giving.

Interviewee: I think so, yes, that actually happened in the last interview. It was commented like, maybe you should have UK Garage drums and then I discovered a whole genre that I had missed. It turned into a comment that made me actually try it and get excited about the genre.