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Community Music and Youth

An Appreciative Inquiry into Kinetika Bloco

As my new friends and I stepped in time to the music, I could feel the vibrations from the line of surdo drums behind me shivering through my body, mixing with the adrenaline stimulated by the excitement of performing. In unison with the repinique section, I drummed the funky soca rhythm to our remix of 'London is the Place for Me' – a fitting song to describe the warmth and support I felt in that very moment. The energy flowing through the band was electric. The dancers spun around in front of us in their flamboyant costumes making sure that, if people hadn't already stopped in their tracks at the sounds of a 150 piece carnival band, they did so now.[1]

This vivid memory of mine portrays just a small insight into the joyful and educational time I spent from the ages of 15-17 as a member of Kinetika Bloco, a youth carnival performance group based in south London. Being in the group gave me a wealth of unique and exciting experiences that helped shape my identity.

It is from this position of familiarity that I present an appreciative inquiry into Kinetika Bloco: a study of *what* works and *how*, in contribution to the developing community music discourse, with the hope of aiding the growth of similar organisations. Kinetika Bloco's success is evidenced through a wealth of positive individual testimonies,[2] its impact on the London jazz scene (Hutchinson 2018) and its long-term sustainability.[3] Heath and Roach highlight the positive impacts community music can have on youth, supporting the proliferation of such projects (1994), while recent British government youth funding cuts necessitate a growing societal need for alternative youth organisations (Bulman 2019). This paper supports Bartleet and Higgins' call for a 'deep understanding of what change community music facilitators are trying to make', focusing on '*understanding* the changes that are taking place rather than simply *proving* them' (2018, 7). This inquiry will observe and analyse the processes behind seven key strengths of Kinetika Bloco. An observation of failures would have undoubtedly

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Usflr0XzTI
[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3pnnsNnkt4
[3] Kinetika Bloco has been active for 20 years.

strengthened this inquiry, and I plan to explore this in future research. This paper will demonstrate *how* Kinetika Bloco is a sustainable and successful community music group broadening opportunities available to many young people, thus serving to empower those in marginalised positions and help to destabilise hegemonic power structures.

What is Kinetika Bloco?

Kinetika Bloco is a charity-registered youth performance group that was founded in 2000 by musician Mat Fox and costume designer Ali Pretty. Kinetika Bloco recruits new brass, woodwind and steel pan players, drummers and dancers between the ages of 8 and 25 annually at its two-week junior and senior summer schools, where participants learn the repertoire, get to know each other and make costumes, going on to perform throughout the year. The website describe the group's aim as, 'get[ting] young people from south London engaged in long term creative activity, advancing their education, skills, and capacity' (Kinetika Bloco 2011).

Clear ethos

Kinetika Bloco's values are creativity, respect, risk, family and leadership, and were consolidated through a vote taken by a team of participants and staff in 2010. These are transmitted through the organisation's social media, staffing team, leadership programme, and in turn, participants. This retains clarity in the group's mission, upholds transparency to participants, and supports funding applications in presenting a reflexive organisation clear in its aims. This demonstrates the enactment of a critical ethics, which Lines' highlights as important in community music (2018, 386). Tamzyn French, CEO, explained, 'we got together and we went through different values and everyone picked what they thought the values of Kinetika Bloco were, and then we compared everybody's list' (French 2020). Ruben Fox, artistic director of Kinetika Bloco and son of the late founder Mat Fox, also highlighted the reflexive development of the group: 'the growth of it was very much organic. […] Its development was largely a product of the people who [were] involved, […] and the ideas of the people who stayed' (Fox 2020). Bartleet and Higgins emphasise a community music 'emphasis on negotiation through collaboration', arguing that 'learning has customarily taken place through a

bottom-up rather than top-down approach' (2018, 3). Taking this approach assumes an organisation's ability to establish itself without shared values, but to later critically and democratically choose new ones. This demonstrates an initial top-heavy power structure, but ensuring a redistribution of this power as the organisation gains support, through critical engagement in a collaborative manner. These values are then reinforced by a consistent staffing team and youth leadership programme.

Leadership programme

Kinetika Bloco's leadership programme provides the opportunity for participant progression, offering keen members the chance to move up within the organisation whilst learning transferrable skills.[4] Alongside offering personal development, this programme feeds back into the group by providing trained individuals Kinetika Bloco can then hire, demonstrating a sustainable practice that results in staff members with an intimate understanding of the organisation. In this programme, the participants undergo leadership training and the opportunity to exercise newly learnt skills within the context of the band. Tamzyn highlighted the importance of this programme in providing an empathetic creative team made up predominantly of leadership programme graduates: 'that mission and that idea of why are we doing this, they get it because they were a part of that' (French 2020). Ruben, who began Kinetika Bloco as a young member, similarly explained the cyclical impact of this programme: 'I've got an obligation to feed back into [Kinetika Bloco] because [I] know what a positive impact it can have' (Fox 2020). The leadership programme provides role models for younger members and higher positions within the group to aspire towards. This programme also makes the organisation sustainable, as it is able to recruit from within, training new potential staff members each year. The strength of the leadership programme also supports Kinetika Bloco's funding applications in highlighting its provision of training in transferrable skills (French 2020).

Strong Long-Term Team

A small core staffing team with personal experience of the organisation ensures clarity in their aims, efficient communication, and low staffing costs. Kinetika Bloco is run by one full time contracted

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[4] https://youtu.be/JZvQsJ8FaLg

employee, one part-time employee, and two one-day a week project managers. The rest of the team are employed on a freelance basis. Three members of the core staffing team have been through Kinetika Bloco as participants, while Tamzyn, the CEO, has worked with the organisation since 2004.

High level musical tuition is provided by passionate facilitators who are also professional musicians, who act as role models and mentors to the participants. These facilitators' long-term commitment to the group also ensures consistency in the level and style of tuition. The core facilitators have been involved in the organisation since its early inception – Claude Deppa joined in 2000, Andy Grappy in 2001, and Sam Agard in 2004 – and helped to choose its values, meaning they are well acquainted with following them. Tamzyn highlighted the strength of this, noting, 'it's that consistency of the mission and the vision, but also the staff delivering it, so everyone's on the same page and going in the same direction and got the same ideas, which help it to be long term' (French 2020). Mullen and Deane stress the importance of a long-term team in building a sustainable community music project, noting that 'retaining a workforce is more efficient than rebuilding one for each separate project' (2018, 4).

Establishing such a workforce was enabled by Mat's links from his active career as a musician, demonstrating the benefits of a community music project leader with a certain amount of social capital. The social capital that these facilitators hold, in turn, filters down to the group's participants. Nathaniel Cross, ex-participant, stressed the important role Kinetika Bloco played in connecting him with his first musical mentor, Andy Grappy (brass tutor). Andy gave Nathaniel new music to listen to, invited him to gigs, and introduced him to Tomorrow's Warriors, a talent development agency that enabled Nathaniel to further develop his musical skills and progress to his career as a musician (Cross 2020).

Peer-to-peer tuition

Kinetika Bloco promotes peer-to-peer tuition through staff encouragement and the leadership programme, which spreads an ethos of peer-mentorship. Bartleet and Higgins recognise this as a common trait of community music, writing, 'frequently we see commitment to flexible approaches to

teaching and learning, including the idea that a workshop will include expertise among participants, and that learning will take place in all directions' (2018, 10). Tamzyn stressed how the leadership programme 'focused a lot that young people as leaders need to then help other young people, and have this mentoring culture' (French 2020). This boosts the musical quality of the band through extended learning beyond the facilitated activities, encouraging the participants' musical skills to flourish, motivated by peer mentoring and encouragement. Ruben highlighted the value of this, saying, 'amongst sections they're helping each other as well. We encourage the supporting of each other. […] if you do something and the person next to you doesn't know it, then show it to them, so we can all make a sound as big as possible' (Fox 2020).

Community embedded

A critical awareness of location and early-on establishment of community ties have allowed Kinetika Bloco to form sustainable practices that encourage a constant flow of new participants and recurring performances. This key community music success factor is emphasised by Chong et al, who argue for the importance of local ties in a community music project (2013). Mat's role as a peripatetic music teacher allowed him to form links between Kinetika Bloco and local secondary schools early on. Many of these connections have been maintained to this day, and are strengthened by new ones, such as a recent link to the Highshore School in Camberwell, a complex mixed needs secondary school.

Originally established to perform at the Mayor's Thames Festival in 2000, Kinetika Bloco maintains links with local community groups and councils, regularly performing at local events such as Notting Hill Carnival. Many of these local events are large, high profile events, which generate a considerable amount of excitement amongst the young people. Welch and McPherson stress the importance of this, writing, 'ongoing musical development occurs most meaningfully and effectively when it is valued as deeply significant by the musical participants themselves' (2012, 13).

An engagement with locality is also imbedded in the band's musical repertoire, which reflects the multiculturalism of London and its global ties, demonstrating use of the music itself as 'a bridge that connects young people to the others in their neighbourhoods, school groups, and wider world

communities' (Campbell 2005, 30). The performance described at the beginning of the paper moved from Dizzee Rascal's 'Dance Wiv Me' – a grime reference which kept the repertoire exciting, relevant, and 'cool', as a teenager – into Lord Kitchener's 'London is the Place for Me', noting London's postcolonial multicultural influences, before being interrupted by a brief excerpt of jazz standard 'Brazil', alluding to the band's Brazilian-influenced samba drumming section.[5] This varied repertoire is further stimulated by shared arranging within the group, with participants encouraged and trained to write their own arrangements (Fox 2020).

Inclusive

Inclusivity and diversity are embedded into Kinetika Bloco's practices, thus providing musical tuition to the marginalised. Along with empowering the marginalised and teaching young people to interact with a diverse range of people, this inclusivity helps support funding applications (French 2020). Bartleet and Higgins observe 'inclusive musical participation' as a common feature in community music projects (2018, 8).

Ties to local state schools allow for a steady flow of participants from a variety of backgrounds, including many SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) children from the Highshore School. The inclusion of children from SEND backgrounds, who form 28% of the 2191 young people currently engaged in the organisation, led Kinetika Bloco to adjust their practices to ensure that they were accessible for all young people (French 2020).

There is no minimal musical ability required to join, an important factor in ensuring the inclusion of young people from lower economic backgrounds. Shayanna Dyer-Harris, programme manager, told me that they currently have a flautist who has only 'just started making a sound on her flute, but that doesn't stop her from being a massive part of the rehearsals' (Dyer-Harris 2020). This is supported by peer-to-peer learning, which helps the lower level musicians improve quicker, due to peer encouragement and continued tuition outside of the sessions. The inclusion of many highly skilled

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[5] https://youtu.be/53Yj2thagU4

musicians in the band ensures that the musical quality remains high, granting increased encouragement for the beginners through being able to participate in producing high quality music.

As the Southbank Centre's Youth Company in Residence, Kinetika Bloco uses the venue in kind every year. This allows them to keep the summer school costs low at just £35 per participant, with bursaries available.

Variety of financial sources

Kinetika Bloco receives their £250,000 turnover per annum from a variety of sources: 50% from public funding, 25% from philanthropic income and 25% from earned income. This supports Mullen and Deane's claim that a sustainable community music project must rely on a variety of income and not just public or private grants. The earned income fits into Mullen and Dean's term 'growing the market', which they explain as 'new ways of offering community music-type services to those with finances to pay for them' (2018, 185). Kinetika Bloco's services include 'events, workshops, corporate team builds and partnering on larger scale projects' (Kinetika Bloco 2011). The applications for public and private grants are supported by their 'talent development' (the leadership programme) and inclusive practices, which were highlighted as reasons for their selection as a National Portfolio Organisation in the years 2018-2022 (French 2020).

Fundraising events form a prevalent part of Kinetika Bloco's regular activity, and have enabled the group to continue receiving financial support throughout the Covid-19 epidemic, through online fundraising events. Training the young people involved to fundraise provides further sustainability for the group, resulting in the participation of skilled individuals who can help raise money for the band.

This inquiry highlights how Kinetika Bloco utilise a variety of techniques common to community music practices in order to ensure their success and sustainability, demonstrating a particular focus on critical reflexivity and the sharing of power. This constant critical reflexivity enables the organisation to grow in an organic manner, ensuring that its decisions and actions are generated from within, thus granting power to its participants. Through inclusive practices, this power sharing holds broader

significance by actively distributing power to the marginalised, ultimately serving to challenge

hegemonic power structures.

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