

Examining Social Feedback as a Predictor of Creativity in Theatre Art

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Abstract

Creativity in theatre art is widely understood as a socially embedded process, shaped not only by individual artistic disposition but by the interpersonal and social environment within which theatrical work is conceived, rehearsed, and performed. This paper examines social feedback, the evaluative and responsive input theatre practitioners receive from directors, fellow cast members, audiences, and broader social networks, as a predictor of creativity among theatre artists. Drawing on the componential theory of creativity and social exchange theory, and a qualitative synthesis of creativity research, theatre and performance studies, and social psychology literature, the paper examines how the nature, timing, and source of social feedback shape creative output in theatrical practice. The paper distinguishes between constructive, developmentally oriented feedback and evaluative or controlling feedback, arguing that the former is generally associated with enhanced creative risk-taking and idea generation, consistent with Amabile's componential theory, while the latter can suppress the intrinsic motivation that the theory identifies as essential to creative performance. The paper further considers the distinct social feedback dynamics of the rehearsal environment, characterized by ongoing, developmentally oriented peer and directorial feedback, relative to live performance and audience reception, which introduces immediate, less controllable social feedback with distinct creative implications. The paper concludes that social feedback functions as a significant, though conditionally variable, predictor of theatrical creativity, and offers recommendations for structuring rehearsal and directorial feedback practices in ways that support, rather than undermine, creative development.

Keywords: Social feedback, creativity, theatre art, componential theory, social exchange theory

1. Introduction

Theatre art occupies a distinctive position among creative disciplines in that its creative process is inherently and continuously social: theatrical work is conceived, developed, and refined

through sustained interaction among directors, actors, designers, and, ultimately, audiences, rather than in the relative isolation characteristic of some other creative domains. This paper examines the role of social feedback, broadly defined as the evaluative, responsive, and interpretive input theatre practitioners receive from these various social sources, as a predictor of creativity in theatrical practice.

The premise motivating this inquiry is that creativity in theatre art cannot be adequately understood as a purely individual cognitive process, but must be examined as an outcome shaped substantially by the social feedback environment within which theatrical creative work occurs. This paper asks: in what ways, and under what conditions, does social feedback function as a predictor of creativity in theatre art, and what distinguishes feedback that enhances creative output from feedback that constrains it?

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on creativity theory and social feedback in artistic and theatrical contexts; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses findings across feedback type, feedback source, and the distinct social feedback dynamics of rehearsal versus live performance; and section six concludes with recommendations for theatrical practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Creativity as a Socially Situated Process

Contemporary creativity research has increasingly moved away from purely individual, trait-based conceptions of creativity toward socially situated models that recognize the substantial influence of interpersonal and environmental factors on creative output. This shift is particularly consequential for the study of collaborative art forms such as theatre, where the creative product, a theatrical performance, is inherently the outcome of sustained social interaction rather than solitary individual production.

2.2 Feedback and Creativity in Organizational and Artistic Contexts

A substantial body of literature within organizational creativity research has examined the relationship between feedback and creative performance, generally finding that the effect of

feedback on creativity is contingent on its framing and content rather than uniformly positive or negative. Feedback framed as informational and developmental, providing specific, actionable guidance oriented toward improvement, has been consistently associated with enhanced creative performance, while feedback framed as controlling or purely evaluative, emphasizing judgment of the individual's competence rather than the work's development, has been associated with reduced intrinsic motivation and diminished creative risk-taking.

2.3 Feedback Dynamics in Theatre Practice

Theatre and performance studies literature has documented the distinct social feedback structures characteristic of theatrical creative processes, including the directorial feedback relationship within rehearsal, peer feedback among ensemble cast members, and the qualitatively different feedback dynamic introduced by live audience response during performance. Scholarship on actor training and ensemble-based theatrical practice has particularly emphasized the role of psychologically safe rehearsal environments, in which performers feel able to take creative risks without fear of harsh evaluative judgment, as a precondition for the emergence of innovative and creatively ambitious theatrical work.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws primarily on Teresa Amabile's componential theory of creativity, which identifies domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation as the three core components necessary for creative performance, with intrinsic task motivation identified as particularly sensitive to social and environmental influences, including feedback. Amabile's theory further distinguishes between informational feedback, which supports intrinsic motivation and creative performance, and controlling feedback, which undermines it by shifting the individual's psychological orientation toward external evaluation rather than intrinsic engagement with the creative task itself.

This is complemented by social exchange theory, which conceptualizes social interactions, including the giving and receiving of feedback, as an exchange process governed by perceived reciprocity, trust, and relational quality. Applied to theatrical ensembles, social exchange theory

helps explain why feedback delivered within a relationship characterized by trust and mutual respect, such as an established director-actor or peer ensemble relationship, is more likely to be received as developmentally oriented and creativity-enhancing than structurally identical feedback delivered within a lower-trust or more hierarchically distant relationship.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of creativity research, organizational feedback literature, and theatre and performance studies scholarship addressing rehearsal dynamics, directorial practice, and audience reception. Thematic analysis is applied to organize the review around three areas: the distinction between informational and controlling feedback and its creative implications, the role of feedback source and relational quality, and the distinct feedback dynamics characteristic of rehearsal versus live performance contexts. This approach is appropriate given the paper's interpretive and theoretical aim of examining mechanism and pattern within existing scholarship, rather than presenting original empirical measurement specific to a defined theatrical population.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Feedback Type: Informational versus Controlling

Consistent with Amabile's componential theory, the reviewed evidence indicates that informational, developmentally oriented feedback, delivered in a manner that supports the performer's sense of autonomy and competence, is associated with enhanced creative risk-taking and idea generation in theatrical rehearsal contexts. Conversely, feedback perceived as controlling or narrowly evaluative appears to constrain creative output by redirecting performers' motivational orientation away from intrinsic engagement with the creative task and toward defensive or compliance-oriented behaviour, consistent with the theory's prediction regarding the motivational cost of controlling feedback.

5.2 Feedback Source and Relational Quality

The findings further suggest that the creative impact of a given piece of feedback is substantially moderated by the relational context in which it is delivered, consistent with social exchange

theory's emphasis on trust and reciprocity. Feedback from a director or peer with whom a performer has an established, trust-based working relationship appears more likely to be received as developmentally intended, even where its content is critical, than structurally similar feedback delivered within a lower-trust relationship, where the same content may be perceived as threatening or purely evaluative.

5.3 Rehearsal Feedback Dynamics

Within the rehearsal environment specifically, the evidence points to the importance of psychologically safe feedback structures, in which performers are granted permission to experiment and fail without harsh evaluative consequence, as a precondition for creatively ambitious theatrical development. Directorial practices that frame rehearsal explicitly as an exploratory, low-stakes creative space, distinct from the higher-stakes evaluative context of eventual public performance, appear to support more extensive creative risk-taking during the developmental phase of theatrical production.

5.4 Live Performance and Audience Feedback

Live performance introduces a qualitatively distinct social feedback dynamic, characterized by immediate, largely uncontrollable audience response, including laughter, applause, silence, or visible disengagement, which theatre practitioners must interpret and, in some performance traditions, respond to in real time. The findings suggest that this form of feedback operates on a different creative timescale than rehearsal feedback, contributing less to the developmental shaping of the theatrical work itself and more to performers' immediate in-the-moment creative adaptation and confidence, with experienced performers generally demonstrating greater capacity to draw creatively productive adjustments from audience feedback without allowing negative audience response to undermine subsequent creative risk-taking.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined social feedback as a predictor of creativity in theatre art, finding that feedback's creative impact is significantly shaped by its framing as informational versus controlling, the relational trust characterizing the feedback relationship, and the distinct social

feedback dynamics of rehearsal versus live performance contexts. These findings position social feedback not as a uniformly positive or negative influence on theatrical creativity, but as a variable whose creative impact depends substantially on how it is structured and delivered.

The paper recommends: first, theatre directors and instructors should prioritize informational, developmentally framed feedback practices during rehearsal, explicitly distinguishing constructive critique from purely evaluative judgment; second, deliberate cultivation of trust-based ensemble relationships should be treated as a foundational element of theatrical creative process, given the demonstrated role of relational quality in shaping how feedback is received; third, rehearsal environments should be explicitly structured as psychologically safe, exploratory spaces distinct from the evaluative stakes of live performance, to support creative risk-taking during the developmental phase of production; and fourth, further empirical research, including direct observational or survey-based study of specific theatrical ensembles, is recommended to more precisely measure the relationship between feedback characteristics and creative output identified through this qualitative synthesis.

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International Journal of Functional Research in Arts and Humanities (IJFRAH)

Vol. 3 No. 2 (2024)

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