Championing creative pedagogies: A case study of a learning community in a State High School instrumental music programme

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Abstract

This paper applies the insights gained from the theoretical perspective of social realism[1] in education to the initial stages of a study into the nature of the learning practice manifest in an innovative Instrumental Performance Programme and learning community. Key themes include teacher and pupil perceptions of instrumental music, learning pedagogic practice, how they describe and value them and how they enact them. I go on to theorise on and define creative pedagogies, and examine how an understanding of creativity and pedagogy influences the contemporary school instrumental performance programme. Video exemplars provide a macro view of opportunities for: (i) 'belonging' to a learning community; (ii) using the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) to fill the gap between the actual and the possible; (iii) allowing for the emergence of creative possibilities; and (iv) the use of creative pedagogies to fashion / champion an instrumental learning community. A discussion of the broad themes that underlie the findings and their implications includes a consideration of what constitutes creative pedagogies in instrumental performance programmes, how we know when learning takes place, and why such questioning gradually leads to joint new meanings and understandings, with ultimately the potential for new forms of socially developed practice.

Keywords: Creativity, pedagogies, theorising instrumental teaching and learning, social realism, constructivism, community of practice

[1] Social realism, as argued by Maton and Moore (2010), views knowledge-producing fields as comprising both relational structures of concepts and methods for relating these to the empirical world, and actors positioned in institutions within specific social and historical contexts. Social realism can be understood as superseding 'constructivism'. It signals a shift from viewing knowledge in terms of construction – especially when this implies we can construct the world as we see fit, free of the consequences of how the world will react back on that construction – towards a focus on its production within relatively autonomous fields of practice according to socially developed and applied procedures.

1. Introduction

There is a competing ethical claim and tension between two prominent agendas for school reform: the accountability agenda and the creativity agenda (see Burnard, 2011a). Under the accountability agenda, teachers are required to measure and test students, and to report using mandated high stakes testing, which emphasise 'purpose' and 'value' over imagination, experimentation and possibility thinking.

Under the creativity agenda, teachers are expected to act effortlessly, fluidly, to take risks, be adventurous, and develop pedagogy and creativity (and creative pedagogies) in order to enhance their own knowledge and skills as creative professionals. Teachers in schools are expected to develop as *creative teachers* as well as developing *creative learners* and put *knowledge as an object* centre-stage when thinking about education in a 21st Century economy that rewards creativity and innovation.

The accountability agenda makes it difficult for music teachers, and particularly those working in instrumental performance programmes, to work more creatively with the 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' curriculum. Typically, the aim is to promote and reflect the 'official' interests and values shaped by the ideologies and cultural assumptions of the surrounding institutional and dominant social groups. The classroom, curricular and school structures are not neutral sites waiting to be shaped by educational professionals.

Yet, *what constitutes creativity* in education, and more particularly *in instrumental music performance programmes*, remains ambiguous. Both education and music education are contexts shaped in the same ways as language and knowledge: historical and social power and particular canons make particular practices seem natural. Rather, and instead, social realism (understood as superseding 'constructivism') views knowledge-producing and creativity-producing fields as comprising relational structures of concepts and methods for teachers positioned in institutions within specific social and historical contexts, with a focus on the sociality of knowledge. It emphasises that musical knowledge and creativity is created (rather than simply produced) in a positive learning environment in which students can take risks, engage in imaginative activity, and do things differently.

Important research conducted over a decade ago by Woods et al. (1997) identified instances of teachers struggling with the tensions that arise from educational reforms. More than ten years on, it is recognised that the translation of education policy into pedagogic practice is neither straightforward nor unproblematic. The field positioning of creativity and accountability agendas in education causes tensions for teachers and pupils, as does the rhetoric and authority invoked by these texts. As Maton and Moore (2010) have demonstrated, *social realism* offers a language for theorising the construction of the dominant discourse underpinning these reform agendas, and the radical distinctiveness of innovative practices which explore ways to subvert the privileged status of scientific knowledge over other forms of knowledge, such as instrumental musical knowledge and performance.

This presentation focuses on the characterisation of creative pedagogies as manifest in a case study of a high school instrumental performance programme as described in the next section.

2. The Instrumental Program as an overarching framework for developing creative pedagogies

There is wide acceptance that instrumental teaching is a complex task involving a high degree of professional craft knowledge and musical expertise (McIntyre and Brown, 1993). There is also general agreement that good teaching is well organised, reflective and planned, based on sound subject knowledge, dependent on effective classroom management and requires an understanding of children's developmental needs. Most importantly, however, good teaching inspires, stimulates, and facilitates children's creativity and imagination and uses exciting and varied approaches.

Teacher training and experience is also viewed as a pathway toward becoming a professional teacher and developing pedagogy. McIntyre and Brown (1993: 17) suggest

that the knowledge that distinguishes professional teachers is acquired primarily through their practice experience in the classroom rather than their formal training (this is what they refer to as professional 'craft' knowledge). We see this particularly with instrumental performance teachers who become experienced, effective teachers; they have acquired substantial knowledge about teaching through experience, though it may be difficult to put this into words. Therefore, music teachers' pedagogical approaches reside more deeply in their bodies than their minds. The notion that pedagogies are tacit, spontaneous, elusive and embodied adds another critical, yet ineffable, dimension to this *pedagogical research*. Nonetheless, making this knowledge and creativity more transparent is a key focus and seen as critical: to the present study; to the development of new music teachers; to a more effective instrumental (and classroom) practice; and to the assessment of teachers.

There is a long history of instrumental pedagogic practice in participatory arts activities, both in schools and in communities. Models of instrumental pedagogic practice vary considerably. However, effective instrumental performance of teaching and learning in schools suggest it is in the act of creativity itself that empowerment lies. Instrumental music teaching is a subtle and complex art, and successful teachers, like artist-musicians, view their work as a continuing process of reflection and learning.

For music teaching to be effective, either for students or for teachers' professional development, Wenger (1998: 73) argued that there must be genuine collaboration, dialogue, openness, and mutual tuning. Under these conditions, a collaborative partnership between pupils and teachers can develop, where pupils and teachers are engaged in a dialogue and are dialogic in their teaching and learning. For this to happen, they need to have time for thinking; to encourage and maintain ambiguity; and share understanding concerning what they are doing and what this means within the community (Galton, 2008).

What happens when teachers and pupils co-construct a pedagogy in which their collaboration encompasses "the act of teaching, together with the ideas, values and collective histories that inform, shape and explain that act" (Alexander, 2008: 38)? To

analyse how this happens, in my research I study how the core acts of teaching – namely, "task, activity, interaction, and judgment" (p. 78) – feature in the dialogue between teachers and artists. Research also tells us how important it is for teachers to alter traditional school boundaries of time and space to allow for unpredictable, rigorous, reflective and improvisational teaching (Burnard, 2011b). If teaching itself is a performative process of improvisation, of being led somewhere new and pointing to the integral role of creativity and the possibility thinking in it, then a good starting point is to examine what constitutes creative pedagogies.

3. Context of the study (methodology/methods/participants[2])

Ten years ago the particular Queensland State High School and special music performance programme and its learning community featured in this study had a solid but unremarkable instrumental music programme, based – like so many others in the Australian system – on concert bands, competitions and occasional school concerts. Like many such programmes, it was attractive to the more academically gifted students and to those highly motivated students with an interest in classical music. But it provided little opportunity for those who hadn't engaged with music before, and those who had trouble engaging with school life – particularly boys. So, the head of the programme decided to: (*a) extend the programme* beyond its traditional demographic, without compromising the quality; (*b) generate a greater sense of community*; (c) induct the students into the *emotional and expressive dimensions* of communicative musicality; (d) have *an 'open-door' staffroom and the sharing of food*; (e) *involve parents*; (f) *introduce intergenerational ensemble participation* and the importance of '*values'*, motivational norms and achievement choices; and (g) *involve past students* and positive role models. How this happened will be discussed further in the presentation.

The research questions, such as: *(i) what constitute teacher and pupil perceptions of creative pedagogies in instrumental teaching*, (ii) *how are they described and valued and (iii) how are they enacted*, required a qualitative methodology. The methodological approached needed to reflect multiple and situated realities, and socially constructed meanings. Data collection methods include interviews, observations, participant self-documentation and documents.

[2] These details will be included in the presentation. Word count constraints prevent their inclusion here.

An *intrinsic and instrumental case study* was undertaken so as to shed light on the practice and ideology underpinning creative pedagogy, as manifested in a particular instrumental performance programme.

Video was used to record behaviour and social interaction in a set of rehearsals and make recordings available for later inspection. The temporal affordances of video research are critical to the study. With video, I was able to slow down or replay a sequence again and again. I could transcribe it and link the transcription to the relevant segments of the video, which was available for replay and further analysis as well as for linking to other segments. This *microscopic* approach to the study of music learning enabled brief episodes to magnify small details and allowed for cycling back and forth between the immediate and mediated attentional worlds of the instrumental ensemble and performance learning.

4. Findings (and illustrations) of pedagogic (and learning) practices from video episodes and interviews

In the next section, I will provide a snapshot of one of three video episodes and interview transcripts, which will feature in the presentation. The case episodes feature the Percussion 1 ensemble, the flagship of the instrumental programme, in rehearsal and performance and will illustrate/translate the following findings (or forms of practice):

i. The emphasis on the activity of learning as a *sociospatial* practice encompassing the learning community's *shared values* (ideology) (which underpin the *operations* (or processes) of becoming and being a creative musician and the *conditions* (as they participate in practice) under which actions take place) (Vygotsky, 1978)

ii. The promotion of instrumental learning as '*belonging'* to a community of practice (which includes sub-themes such as *engagement*, *imagination* and *critical alignment and mutual tuning in*) (Wenger, 1998)

iii. The construction of *teaching as learning* as being situated in practice and in participation in the *learning* practice, and *identity*, as *ways of being* in learning communities in music (which combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of *learning cultures* and *social relations*, and is not based on novice-master relationships).

The first episode I discuss is with the Stephanie, the Head of Instrumental Music. She describes the practice of storymaking and storytelling and extending the idea of 'imagination' as a bridge between what players see (as sighted or notated music) and hear (with the framing of images or ideas invited) along a spectrum of mental activity. She describes, amongst other things, imagination or an imaginative interpretation approach to skills development. Furthermore, because there is no specific assessment outcome, the students seem able to respond more creatively.

The key point is that, even in contexts where there are close *social relations* developed between teacher and pupil reflexively, *imaginative possibilities* and the 'playfulness' of the rehearsal event, effective *learning cultures* and the vital resourcefulness of teacher and student partnerships, enable the social construction of practices that embrace difference. This practice is very different, nestled in the unknown, the complex, the ambiguous, the unfamiliar, the capacity of insight and connection with the teachers' and pupils' inner and outer *creative worlds*.

5. Creating learning spaces for such pedagogies: implications for music in schools and teacher education

What emerges is that pupils tend to see themselves (and thus engage in group interactions) differently. They often describe themselves as being central to the pedagogic practice in the language of the teaching: a dialogic improvisation between the fixed plans, repertoires, and routines that yield to high levels of real-time decision-making. It is not uncommon for both teachers and pupils to recognise that they are going through periods of uncertainty and discomfort as they negotiate the learning of new pieces and the use of time, space and resources.

Other important aspects of creating learning spaces is *risk taking*, *questioning*, *challenging* the status quo, *bending and breaking the rules*, *speculation*, *disturbance*, *conflict*, *discomfort* and *shock*. The consequence of reflection, putting in breathing spaces and still points and reflecting critically on what, why and how teachers and students learn, and how they work in partnership, can be really tricky. Encouraging students to

pursue a line of thinking, getting them to question or challenge the values and practices of society and examine their own motivations, leads to a mutual ongoing reciprocity between teacher and student where each will affect and influence the other.

What matters to teachers the most is how artists deploy their specialised knowledge in practice. Shulman's (1987) construct of *pedagogical content knowledge* equates expertise with the deeper understanding of the structure of the subject. The teachers know how to assess progress in their students' learning. They also view the teachers as experts who are successful because of their superior knowledge of their subject matter, honed through years of experience. This view – of *artisan expertise* – contrasts with a more generic view of *adaptive expertise*, which concentrates on the ability of experts to apply their knowledge and skills to specific contexts in order to do familiar tasks in unfamiliar ways. Sawyer (2011) has applied these ideas *to teaching as improvisation*, particularly the capacity *to adapt reflexively to learning environments*.

This involves a kind of *mutual tuning* in and *openness* to each other. Being able to talk about pedagogic practices, to feel that pull that one needs to be able to listen and tune in and observe different practices, enables teachers (and artists) to experience a renewed sense of purpose and professionalism, a reduced sense of isolation, and a passion for the exploration of their teaching and learning. The business of inviting judgments on "what works" from professional artists, or working with the improvisational characteristics of practice, can enrich and enliven the learning environment. Reapplying that understanding is essential if teachers are to learn how to be more improvisational in the classroom.

In sum, creative pedagogies and the corresponding characteristics of creativity necessitate approaches to education practice which generate communities of practice in music engendered with the following:

1.Dynamic musical learning in the rehearsal and performance practice field sees no focus on a prolonged apprenticeship, nor segmenting of learning or sequencing of achievements, but rather the integration of new knowers at all levels;

2.Self-aware and interactive *musically-charged ensemble playing* so as to express communicative musicality and identity of one who performs in relation to others in ensemble playing;

3.Allowing *a powerful dynamic of educational creative work in young people who imaginatively address the conditions of possibility and prioritise time* for extended planning sessions that put pupils' ideas at the centre of repertoire selection, rehearsal and performance planning; encouraging the pupils to offer speculative answers to challenging questions without fearing failure, unfettered by institutional restraint and approved pedagogy;

4. Developing *new learning spaces which enable the creation of previously unexplored landscapes for the exercise of freedom, informed risk and development of communities of practice which* not only connect with the real world but also can be seen in real-world terms (i.e. that invite risk taking, multivocality, looking anew, and the freedom to explore *the new, the unfamiliar and the inspiring).*

Creative pedagogies are essentially improvisational in nature; they encourage improvisation and less formulaic approaches to teaching. Thus they help teachers understand how to negotiate the teaching paradox in a different way, with a renewed focus on 'unknowing' and possibility, and a commitment to improvisational and imaginative approaches, which are presently outside the performative logic of music learning.

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PAM'S QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Can we argue that fostering the development of a '**community of practice'** creates a lasting and transforming effect on musical learning in our classrooms? Where is your evidence?

2. How should instrumental music education models be recognised in relation to general music education **models of creative pedagogies and the contemporary school classroom**?

3. In Lev Vygotsky's approach to **theorising social forms of learning** (1987/1930; 1998/131), he argues for a socially mediated application of 'experimentation'. Willis (1990) picks up on this when he argued that creativity is an inherent aspect of young people's use of symbolic resources in both their work and leisure activities and for the formation of identities. How can Vygotskyan concepts (play, creativity, fantasy and imagination, social production of meaning) help music teachers in schools develop creative pedagogies that utilise the relationship between learning about media and popular culture through creative processes of identity formation?

4. How can an understanding of **'social realism'** (i.e. as superseding 'constructivism' and as argued by Maton and Moore (2010), and others) help demystify instrumental music teaching and learning, curriculum development and champion creative pedagogies?