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The Courage to Teach Free Improvisation In and Through a Graduate Music Education Class

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ABSTRACT

In this article I describe my affinity for improvisation in music and life, and for free improvisation in particular as a music making practice. In this self-reflective position paper, I use these practices to help locate and define an authentic sense of self as a music education professor. This paper gives an account of my introduction of free improvisation sessions into a weekly, in-person graduate class in psychology and sociology related to music education. Drawing on relevant literature and a university-wide learning initiative, I present my reflections and those of my students on the experience of doing free improvisation over the duration of one semester, that led to enjoyment, growth, and flourishing. In closing, I consider the potential for doing more free improvisation in music and music education classes.

Keywords: improvisation, self-reflection, free improvisation, flourishing, courage, teaching, eudaimonia

Improvisation and Teaching Music Authentically

Improvisation has long been important to me, and to my making music especially, ever since Keith Tippett, a professor and mentor during my formative undergraduate years, awakened in me an affinity for free improvisation. For the three years I attended the Welsh College of Music and Drama in the late 1990s, I craved and reveled in the depth of experience and interpersonal connection that Keith nurtured in his students for an hour

every Friday lunchtime in our free improv class. This class became a place of solace, calming, rejuvenation, and community building. Keith always used few words when encouraging us to play. He would invite various combinations of instrumentalists and singers to play together and then welcome reflections from among the whole class about the spontaneous music making we had witnessed. Most weeks, everyone got a turn to play, and Keith curated a loving, respectful, and welcoming space for people to listen, express themselves, and communicate with one another. For Keith, and for all whom he brought under his wing in that class, free improvisation was not a skill or skill set to be taught, but what Hickey (2009) would later describe as "a disposition to be enabled and nurtured" (286). It was a remarkably impactful class, the influence of which percolated in my unconscious for many years before I wove its ethos intentionally into classes I taught.

Improvisation is one of my very favorite ways of being and characterizes much of how I engage with the world. I resonate strongly with the words of Simon Rose (2017, 152) who explains "improvisation is a large part of how we do things, telling us about the truer nature of our being in the world"; I see myself as one of the "us" to whom Rose refers, while acknowledging there are many who find improvisation quite uncomfortable, challenging, and perhaps even antithetical to their sense of being authentically in the world. I improvise a lot with my 10-year-old daughter, who, over the decade we have known one another, has repeatedly taught me the value of being fully present, reveling in the now, and paying attention to what is happening—or what just is—around us. We like to walk in the woods with no particular destination or goal in mind, beyond spending time there, and we take the opportunity to do so as often as possible, absorbed in the soundscape (Schafer 1969). I have noted elsewhere (Smith 2023) how this "allows me to breathe, expand and relax," and that the woods are "a wonderful place for spontaneous, joyful improvisation with the world" (2).

Fairly recently I began working in a new position at a major research university, and I spent much of my first year like a rabbit in headlights, assailed by new assumptions, parameters, customs, and traditions. As Parker J. Palmer describes in his (1998) book, *The Courage to Teach*, the structures and strictures of institutional environments can leave professors feeling "disconnected from our own truth, from the passions that took us into

teaching, from the heart that is the source of all good work" (1998, 20–21), despite the collegiality and relative autonomy that frequently characterize academic working environments and that are features of my own. I found, for instance, that while my work with music education graduate students was highly engaging and stimulating in a host of ways, it was entirely devoid of musical practice. Another assertion from Palmer provided me with affirmation about my evolved, preferred teaching modus operandi, along with more confidence to pursue this way of being. Palmer notes how "good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (1998, 11). I felt I had not been demonstrating this during my first year in the new job, and so sought new ways to accomplish it—both for my students and in order to feel the sense of personal success from doing so.

I had a hunch that if the students and I just *made music together*, it might be a better experience for us all. Moreover, as someone who had been teaching in schools, studios, and in higher education for a quarter of a century, I had a well-developed (although largely tacit) understanding of how I engaged most effectively with learners. In teaching, I had often felt like the most creative and inspired version of myself, and was therefore hearted by Palmer's assertion, that "the teacher within" is "the voice of identity and integrity … it says things like … 'this is who you are, this is what gives you life'" (1998, 30). Inspired in my second year in my new gig, and with the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic behind us, I sought and found ways to assert and insert my authentic teaching and musical selves into my work as a professor, to give more to my students and, in doing so, hopefully get even more from the job (Palmer 1998). I was motivated by Nasim Niknafs' (2013) assurance that free improvisation could help my "students to feel more self-assured, autonomous, and self-directed" (33), which were qualities that I valued in a "flipped," seminar-type classroom environment that centered vulnerable, open discussion. As Kanellopoulos (2011) has noted, openness and dialogue are indeed foundational characteristics of free improvisation, wherein we can "reside in the becoming" (Niknafs 2022, 7) and the potential for

transformation (Wright & Kanellopoulos 2010) that characterize this type of musicking (Kanellopoulos 2007).

In this article, I describe my engagement with free improvisation as a music-making praxis in two teaching and learning contexts pertaining to my work as a music education professor. I then present my reflections and those of my students on our musicking together and some considerations of potential application of the practice and ethos of free improvisation in other music education contexts and beyond. I hope that this article might be thought-provoking and perhaps even useful to readers.

Method

This is a self-reflective position paper in which I extol some of the virtues and affordances of free improvisation and support these assertions with examples of my own work. In this article, I address primarily the "opinion" and "curriculum" imperatives of the "*TOPICS*" acronym. As Bresler and Stake (2006) advise, "in music education, we have a need for … experiential understandings of particular situations" (278). I present herein an "'opinion' (or 'observations')" article that I hope might "inform readers concerning down-to-earth issues, problems, and considerations that often get little attention in the kind of scholarship that focuses mainly on theoretical research" (MayDay Group 2022). Insofar as this article addresses curriculum, I describe practices from my own teaching context, "that have the kind of local record of effectiveness that reveals their value for that particular situation" (MayDay Group 2022).

I set for myself three goals, pertaining to the addition of free improvisation to an in-person social sciences class. These were, 1) connect theory and practice around including free improvisation in my teaching, 2) model a reflexive teaching practice for my students, and 3) provide some reflections about how and why to include free improvisation in one's teaching. I hope, therefore, that some of what follows may "also hold forth considerable promise for informing and influencing the curricular practices in other schools and of other practitioners" (MayDay Group 2022). In order to garner reflections from students, I wanted to elicit feedback from them without the pressure of requiring them to complete yet

another assignment, since many felt overburdened with work from their jobs and university coursework.

A few times throughout the semester we paused after making music to reflect on what we had done, so that students could share processes, responses, anxieties, suggestions, etc. We did not pause every week as sometimes we musicked longer than others and I was keen to provide enough input on the subject matter of the course that nobody felt short-changed or, worse still, under-prepared in psychological or sociological aspects of their jobs. I regret that I did not record our in-class discussions as there was often rich and constructive feedback from students. Below, I have included informal, voluntary feedback that students later emailed in response to my invitation to submit feedback following their final exams. Some did not take time to provide reflections, but those who did, reflected remarks typical from the wider group throughout the semester.

In preparing this self-reflective article I was reminded of the insight of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who describes how often in scholarship, "there is no division, in practice, between work and life. It is a practice that involves the whole person, continually drawing on past experience as it is projected into the future" (2018, 240). Ingold's observation is true for this paper as I draw on my application, in practical teaching contexts, of music-making and life practices that are essential to who I am; and discuss the potential of this work for my own and others' teaching practices. Furthermore, and borrowing again from Ingold (2021), I write as I also teach— "unashamedly as an amateur … one who studies a topic not like the professional—in order to stage a career, but for the love of it, motivated by a sense of care, personal involvement and responsibility" (10). I do not wish to come across as disingenuous, since of course teaching and writing are essential components of my career as a professional academic. Nonetheless, I also write and teach as Ingold highlights—out of love, care, and a sense of responsibility; I very much love both teaching and writing; I care about this work and about my students and readers. I write primarily because I feel compelled to do so. I write about my own practice because I know it intimately, and hope that in sharing about it with others, they and I can grow and learn from the process.

I feel the weight of responsibility to write and teach to the best of my ability, and both of these practices for me have profound influence on one another. When writing, teaching, musicking, and scholarship are combined as they are in an essay such as this, I feel responsible also to the aims and frames of this journal; I write as an, "experienced, creative, and successful … music education professor" trying, "to share [my] ideas in ways that can stimulate and inform the thinking of teachers and professors elsewhere" (MayDay Group 2022). Data in this article come from my own life (Chang 2008), with this essay comprising a somewhat, "complex mediation and reconstruction of experience" (Pinar et al. 1995, 567). I hope this essay might help to inform readers as they consider whether and how to incorporate improvisational approaches into their own current or future professional practice as music teachers or professors. I include audio files of freely improvised music, recorded in one of my classes, to provide context for the writing and add depth and richness to the descriptions of practice.

Research ethics

This study was deemed by my university's institutional review board for research ethics to be exempt from the need for IRB approval, because it does not constitute research under the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2018). I do not pretend or claim herein to speak for or on behalf of anyone but myself. Music education scholars Juliet Hess (2018) and Alexis Kallio (2020) highlight the complexity and risk inherent in studying others and reporting about that work from behind a veneer of scholarly authority. As a white male US citizen and English speaker, I am aware of my role in inevitably perpetuating colonial, imperial practices in and through scholarship. I do this, though, with humility and a desire to learn; as someone from a long line of working-class tradespeople and a first-generation college student with commensurately low self-esteem, assumed authority has always eluded me. I hope my humble intent comes across in what follows, and I thank readers for giving of their time to engage with this work.

How I Came to Teach Free Improvisation in a Graduate Social Sciences Class

Following completion of my undergraduate studies, I spent over 20 years mostly playing musical theatre and pop/rock music of various kinds, alongside my work as a music educator and (briefly) driving instructor. I revisited improvisation fleetingly in a course I designed and taught at London's Institute of Contemporary Music Performance in the mid-2010s, but that was conceptually so far removed from most curriculum in that institution that the course ran only once, despite being favorably reviewed by most students who had taken it. Following several years, fitting into various institutional boxes to teach particular higher education courses, three things aligned in fairly quick succession to lead me back to free improvisation.

In June 2020, Keith Tippett, the musician and educator who had influenced me so profoundly 25 years prior, died (Fordham 2020). Unable to gather in person, a group of around 20 former students with shared memories of free improvisation classes with Keith gathered on a Zoom call to commiserate our loss and share memories. During that gathering and through social media posts and messages shared in the few weeks following it, I came to understand how, and how profoundly, Keith had influenced my approach to music and life (Smith 2020). Being more responsive, open, and vulnerable always seemed to be the answer in freely improvised music, and so often elsewhere in life too (Smith 2020).

The second event was that I proposed and was accepted to play drum solos one afternoon in the fall of 2020 in the newly refurbished art gallery facing out on to the street of my university's College of Fine Arts. I wanted to play unaccompanied drum kit music in support of initiatives in the School of Music aimed at greater inclusion and recognition of musical paradigms beyond Western Classical music. I soloed in a suit and fedora as a tribute and homage to my musical and political hero, Max Roach, an African American jazz drummer at the forefront of both the musical revolution of be-bop in the 1940s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and '60s (Brennan 2020; Korall 2002). Roach had

performed with speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the latter an alumnus of my university's school of theology, barely yards from the School of Music where I work.

The third occurrence was an invitation to faculty in our department in spring of 2021 to propose one-credit courses for the following fall semester. I was eager to share with students and help nurture in them free improvisation as a "disposition … a process to be encouraged on the way to learning freedom and self-actualization" (Hickey 2009, 296). To this end, I planned a course with activities comprising about 60% making music and the rest spent exploring and sharing learning about free improvisational ethos and approaches from musicians in that tradition (e.g., Maggie Nicols, Pauline Oliveros, Julie Tippetts, and Evan Parker). I was nervous going into the classes, aware of the non-normative status of free improvisation classes in higher education settings (Borgo 2005; Hickey 2015). The course was attended by four students, all of whom reflected very positively on it; one, for instance, remarked how "I feel like our inner child came out during these improvisations … I think we were all able to open up a bit and share our more vulnerable, human sides."

Psychology, sociology, and free improvisation

On Tuesday evenings in the spring semester, I teach two sections of a graduate psychology and sociology class—one is in-person, the other, primarily asynchronous, is online. I relish the responsiveness, spontaneity, and reflexiveness that teaching in-person demands, and the real-time autonomy it affords me as an educator. Teaching in-person, I get to work out, with students, how classes will go. I took advantage of this creative opportunity last spring, adding free improvisation as a feature of our weekly nearly-three-hour meeting. The opportunity to be spontaneous in doing free improvisation with students proved essential to the point of being "off the scale" (Sarath quoted in Hickey 2015, 438). As I hope is and will remain clear, my aim in reflecting on my practice is not to celebrate or promote it, but that others may see points of divergence from and convergence with their own teaching contexts, preferences, and ethea, and that from these they may feel encouraged or enabled (in the instance that they might lack either of these feelings) to be more fully their authentic selves in musical teaching and learning.

I asked students to bring an instrument to class, saying that this could include their voice, but whatever they brought, to be prepared to use it in class, and that it did not need to be an instrument on which they were highly competent. The syllabus I emailed them and posted in the course website, listed "free improvisation" as an activity in each week's lesson outline. There were 14 students in the class. None had taken my free improvisation course in the fall, and only two reported minimal prior encounters with free improvisation. I set up a rough template for class sessions so that they ran thusly:

- 6:30–7:00, discussion around required readings
- 7:00–8:00, lecture and discussion on the week's focus area
- 8:00–8:15, bio break
- 8:15–8:45, free improvisation
- 8:45–9:15, small group discussions pertaining to readings, lecture, etc.

We adhered broadly to this outline throughout the semester. I began the semester keen to get through as much content as possible, and then realized, as I do every year, that most students were overwhelmed with responsibilities at work, home, university, and in-between, and that *quality of learning* never equated to *quantity of teaching*. I worked hard to keep everyone engaged while actually in class. Small-group discussions made it easier for people to speak up and be heard, full-group lectures meant students could take notes or nap depending on their immediate needs, and the musical free improvisation provided an opportunity for engagement at the level with which individuals were comfortable, with room to hide, shine, connect, and collaborate.

When the time came to make music, we all sat in a circle with instruments at our disposal; I wanted no one to feel exposed, left out, or marginalized. I provided a dozen hand percussion instruments, an acoustic guitar, and a cajon for anyone who might wish to play those. Unlike the two-full-day free improvisation course I had led in the fall, I did not feel there was adequate class time to delve far into pedagogical rationale or traditions of free improvisation that informed what I hoped we might do together. I said little more than that I found free improvisation a positive way to be, that I hoped that we might derive individual and collective benefits from improvising together, and that they might consider potential

pedagogical takeaways for their own contexts. I introduced four tenets to guide our musicking and said I would not be the one to make the first sound. The tenets were:

- Listen.
- Think "how can I support my friends?"
- Think "how can I make this sound better?"
- Trust yourself and others.

People gradually started playing. I closed my eyes, put a clarinet to my lips, listened, and joined in. We made some noises together, with most people reticent at first. After about 15 minutes of us mostly making music in respective and non-collaborative sonic silos, I called the music to halt and asked that we and play again, this time with each person taking time to listen intently to one other musician in the room, and to respond to what they heard. Ten minutes or so later, the results were similar with a few more connections apparent. I thanked the class for their indulgence, said I felt certain we would cohere more as a group as we tried similar activities again in subsequent weeks, and we moved to on discuss some readings.

Over the next few weeks, we undertook variations on the activity just described. Sometimes I suggested we all sing, instead of playing other instruments; I acknowledged my own anxiety around singing anywhere outside my own car or shower, and, as I had done with the instrumental music-making, encouraged anyone similarly shy to make sounds they were comfortable with and which blended in or even that were too quiet for others to hear. Every sound would form part of the sonic tapestry we wove together, and no contribution was more or less important than another. Sometimes I invited students to sit in different places in the classroom so they could hear other voices and sounds. I made occasional suggestions for a piece such as "let's play some long notes this time" or "how about aiming for some dynamic contrast?" We always all made music together as one group. Soon the students suggested approaches themselves – "let's do something with percussion", or "how about another quiet, singing one." Musicking together in this way became a comforting ritual that galvanized cohesion, purpose, and focus among the class. As one student reflected:

> I have a lot of classes on Tuesdays and a long evening class, which makes me tired, but the improvisation experience allows me to relax my brain, so I can fully immerse myself in the world of music to relieve my fatigue and focus more on the rest of the class.

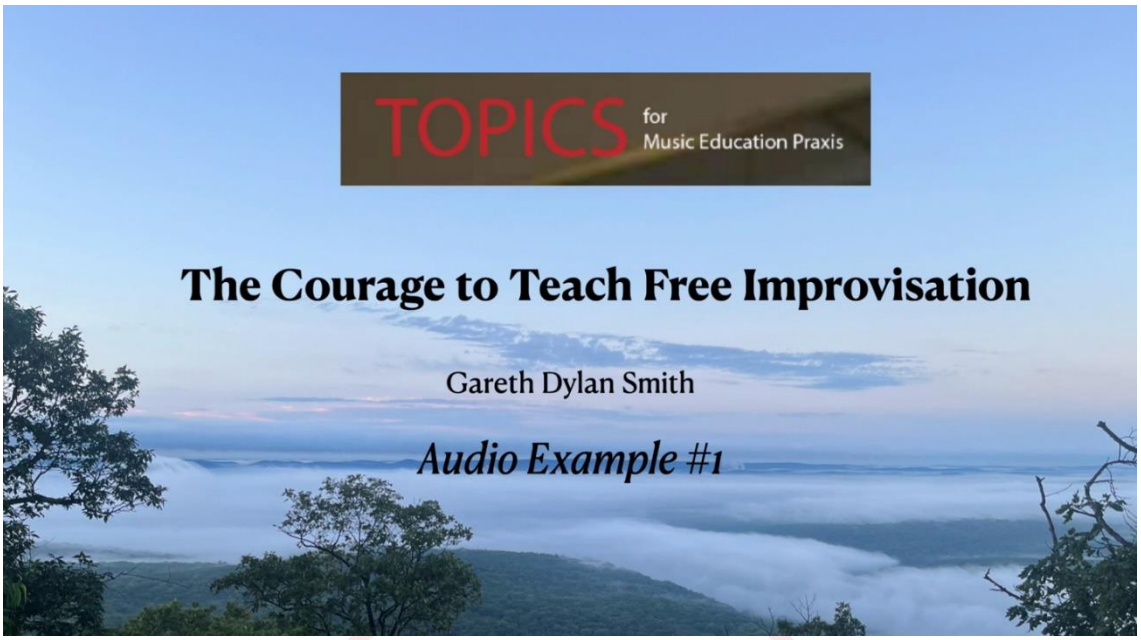
Another noted, "I appreciated this in a three-hour lecture because it's a really good break from the lecture format."

Four weeks into the semester, I asked students to bring a music-making app on a phone, tablet, or laptop. We spent much of the improvisation session in that class learning how various apps worked, what sounds everyone's devices could produce, and what cool stuff others had found, rather than engaged in an earnest, creative endeavor. This music making meandered in cycles of listening, ignoring, experimenting, searching, and zoned-in absorption in one's apps. The room was full of a child-like, fun buzz, with musical outcomes more cacophonous than concerted. The next week I asked everyone to bring apps again—the same ones or different, I didn't mind—and this time we all ambled about the classroom so we could hear one another differently. The result was a fascinating concoction of many similar outcomes from the previous week, plus extended interactions between musicians who found one another on a stroll and jammed. The overall noise was still mostly disconnected, with occasional moments of serendipitous harmony or groove. With the students apparently unsure whether or how to stop the collection of musical monologues, dialogues, and explorations, I intervened after about 30 minutes to say we should probably stop there.

Some students had begun to look bored, and one or two others wore a look that I thought maybe suggested they weren't completely certain of how tinkering mindlessly (or even mindfully, as many had managed to do) with smart phone apps would lead to greater understanding of concepts in psychology and/or sociology as related to music education. I confessed that it probably didn't, and that I had also wanted to give them the chance to resolve the music themselves and I felt we'd lost our social sciences groove by that point in the evening anyway. We took the chance to reflect as a group on how the improvisation had gone, where individuals had followed or neglected the four tenets, and what possible take-

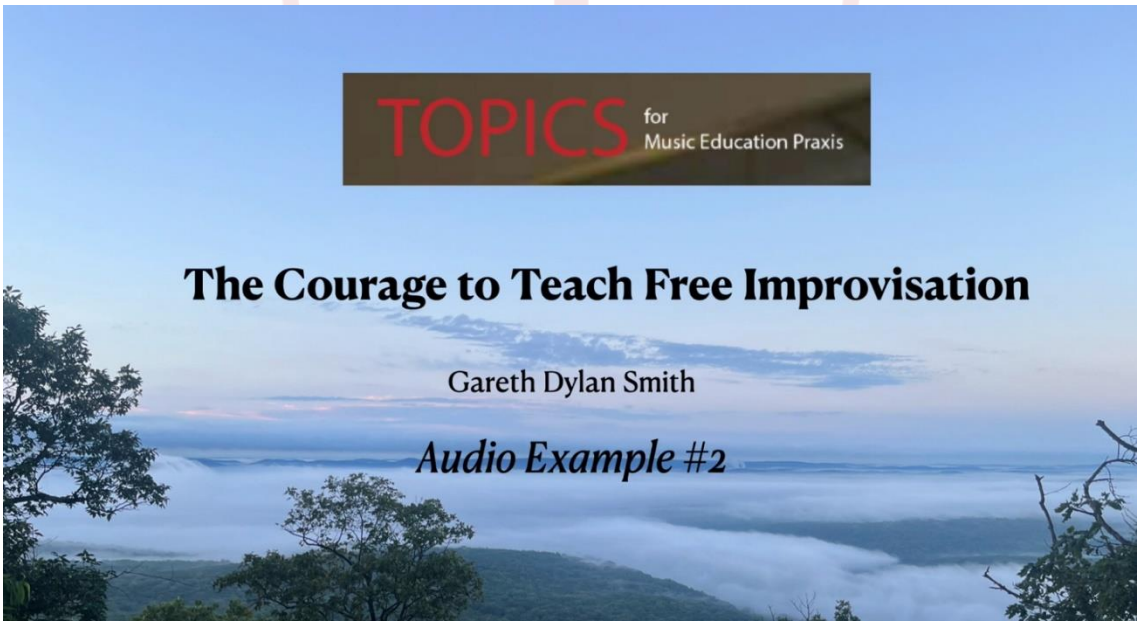
aways there could be for teaching music in students' current or future professional contexts. Some students asked me for more context and direction about the point and purpose our free improvisation, so I uploaded resources to the class website; each Wednesday morning for the remainder of the semester, I added a musical example (a studio recording or live performance of a free improvising musician or group) and a research paper or article about doing, teaching, or learning free improvisation. No one engaged with the resources until months later, after their final exams, but I got the impression they were glad to see that I probably wasn't just making this all up and leading them down the proverbial garden path. This class marked a turning point in the semester's music making activities. Following it, we made much more coherent music together, which I started recording.

Just under halfway through the semester, I suggested we retreat to the fabulously resonant stairwell in the center of the building. We distributed ourselves fairly evenly along the depth of the seven floors and most could not see one another. There was too much reverb for anyone to call the class to quiet or suggest we start improvising, but after a couple of breaks in the general chatter, music emerged. The next several minutes were breathtaking. The intensity of listening and commitment to collective music creation were palpable; most people sang and a couple played wind instruments, a baritone sax sending chills up our spines and producing occasional epic rumbling. As the first piece exhaled and expired, all paused before someone in the depths of the stairwell began another improvisation and gradually all offered sonic suggestions and settled into a sonorous groove. This composition was longer, and more playful, confident, and dynamic. We returned to the classroom with many students visibly uplifted and animated by this exercise in listening, feeling, expressing, and being together. For recordings of these "stairwell jams" hear audio examples #1 and #2, below.



https://youtu.be/5L3ctb7w8vI

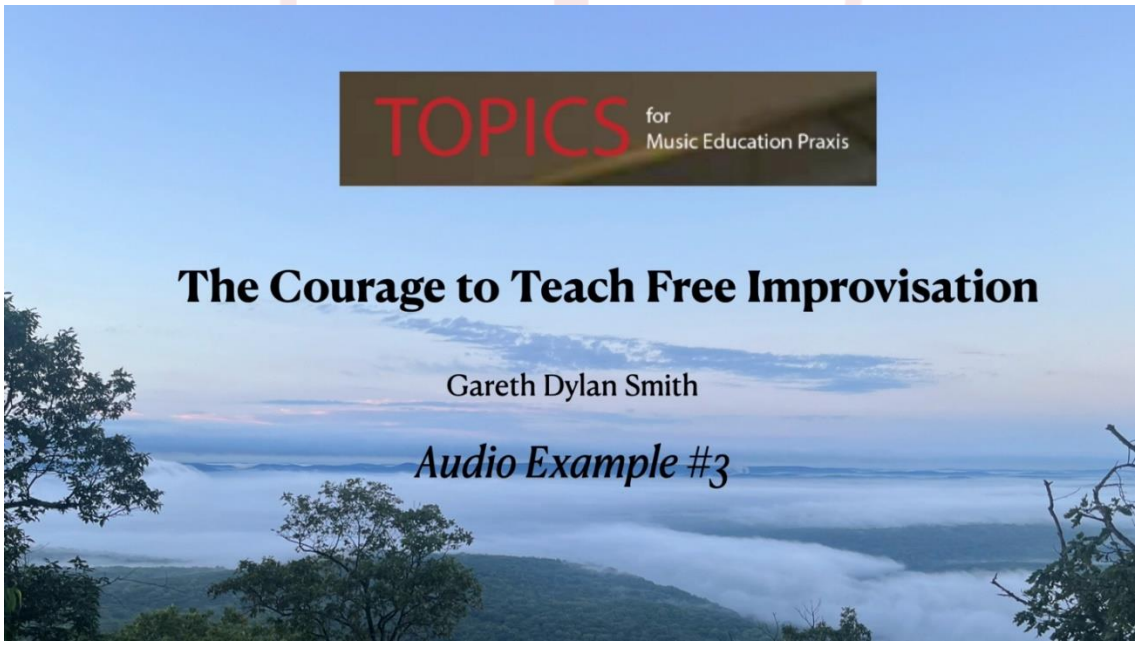
Audio example #1: Stairwell Jam no. 1



https://youtu.be/MoCZG_v_3rA

Audio example #2: Stairwell Jam no. 2

The stairwell jams had felt mutually fulfilling to us all, as we experienced and celebrated an "authentic connection" (Hendricks & Boyce-Tillman 2022, 4) in our co-musicking, and what's more, the recordings captured the earnestness of spontaneous, collaborative composition! We had had to meander and wander—musically and spatially—for the class's sense of ensemble to coalesce. The next week of class, when I said it was time to improvise, the students bolted for the stairs, they were so eager to make music in and with that space. The music was similarly electrifying and cohesive. Shortly after spring break, an April evening was warm enough for us to relocate for musicking in a small park. Adding pedestrians' chatter, traffic noise, trains, sirens, ambulatory cell phone conversations, the gravel under our feet, laughter, and birdsong to our music made it rich with character we could not have planned (Smith 2022). When we first played outside, so eager were the students to make music that I did not have the brief time required to set up my laptop to record; instead, I captured (a perspective on) everything that night using my phone (hear audio example 3).

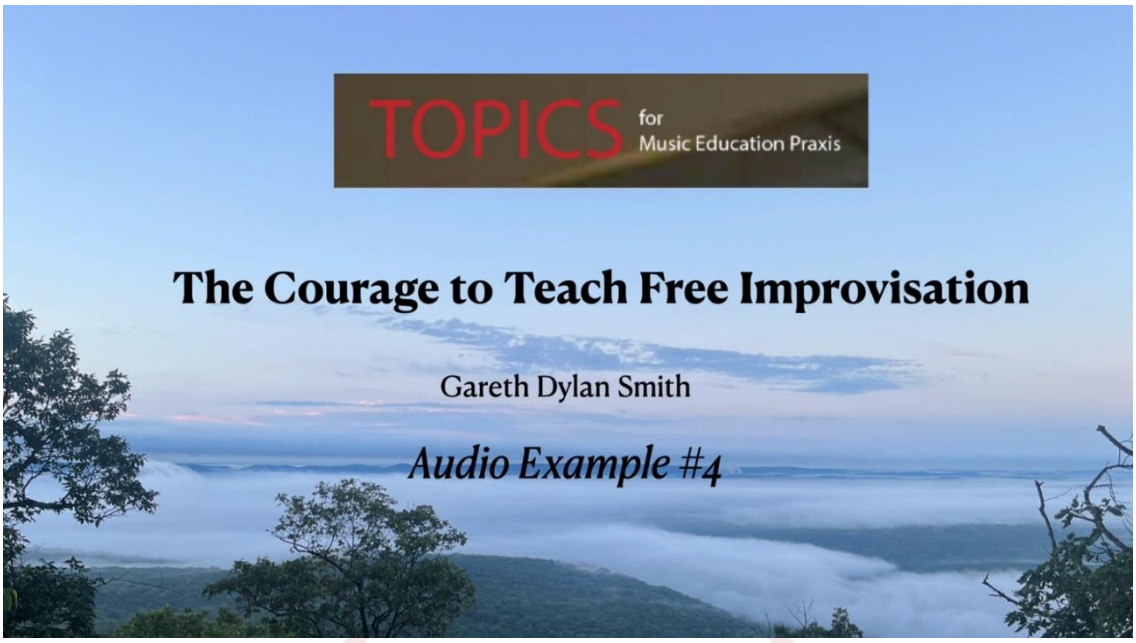


https://youtu.be/BnVcX6bzShc

Audio example #3: Outdoor Jam

Upon Reflection

When the class made music together, sometimes a piece ended with a pause, either of satisfied reflection or with edge-of-seat anticipation, no one quite sure if someone might still have something to say or to play. Other times the music ended with giggles or belly laughs. When we made music in the reverberant stairwell, the ending of a piece was staggered up the stories of the stairs. The class's first stairwell jam proved to be a turning point in the semester. From that moment on, the music always sounded more homogenous —it was still characterful, and inclusive of each person's contribution, but one got the sense that the point had clicked with each musicker and we had all found how to vibe with one another. As one of the students described, "It felt awkward to begin with and became more comfortable as we got to know one another … To hear some of the musicianship going on around the room was exceptional, just stunning." The improvisations became more consciously dynamic, as students soloed momentarily, took the spotlight, backed off, jammed intensely with their immediate neighbor, or just listened and played nothing, waiting to rejoin the sonic weave at the right time. This musical practice became collectively ours. It seemed to me that everyone contributed with sincerity, generosity, and often with joy. Some of this exuberance was captured in the audio recording of our last improvisation together (hear audio example #4).



https://youtu.be/2JD1xpnMt28

Audio example #4: Last Classroom Improvisation

Selfishly, I was thrilled to establish what felt like sincere connections with students, repeatedly, in real time, in the flesh. The online teaching that characterizes so much of my professional modus operandi can be joyless and exhausting, replete with the missed cues and misunderstandings germane to emails, video calls, frozen screens, time-zone confusion, and all the other minor inconveniences that can, despite everyone's best and repeated attempts, sap the soul from the deeply reciprocal human art that teaching should be. By contrast, through this visceral, real-time opportunity for physical collective artistic expression in free improvisation, I was bolstered and elevated emotionally, to experience the energy and ebullience of musical peers committing to collaborative musical creation. It was an honor and privilege, but moreover a full-hearted thrill, to be in the presence of these musicians, sharing and communing in music. It was, moreover, thoroughly encouraging to think that, having experienced this musicking approach and the confidence and joy it curates, these students might feel confident to then re-create similar experiences for

learners in their own classroom contexts, or for themselves and their peers beyond university.

Hearing from the students

I was keen to hear from students about how our weekly music making improvisation hiatus from sociology and psychology of music education had worked for them. I was fairly confident students were not annoyed about making music in class and that the feeling of shared ownership of the moment and the music was real and not merely projected wishful thinking from me; no one had said anything negative to me, and generally graduate students at my institution are quite forthcoming about any dissatisfaction they may feel regarding how they perceive their tuition dollars being deployed. What follow are excerpts drawn anonymously from students' voluntary written, audio-, or video-recorded reflections, on free improvisation during their spring 2022 psychology and sociology course.

Students reflected on the ethos of vulnerability and playfulness that free improvisation can nurture, with one commenting, "teaching doesn't have to be serious all the time. Teaching is also about play, making mistakes, and trying new things." I think this student was referring to my approach to teaching the class all semester, as well as the free improvisation component; regardless, I am glad of their take-away. Related to this comment, several students articulated how the free improvisation had helped make them less anxious than they were used to being when playing music with others, for instance: "I usually get pretty anxious playing in front of other people and I really didn't feel that at all." Another student affirmed how "free improvisation allowed me to be completely free from the pressure of theoretical knowledge, and I could create whatever I wanted to create, and no one would say I was wrong." If making music can help embolden students—at any stage, from elementary school through graduate school—helping them to feel less anxious and more comfortable, then that alone seems like good cause to include it in our work. Accordingly, students remarked on their interest to include this new kind of music making in their own classrooms, for instance, "I think I'd like to include free improvisation in my

teaching as a way for students to have fun, try new instruments, be playful and curious, and bond with each other"—this individual also highlighting the extra- and intra-musical, social benefits of taking part in free improvisation.

Students remarked how our free improvisation became an oasis from the tedium of work, one saying, "This was really the best part of my week. I feel more energized than I've been the entire time I've worked my office job." This same student commented on how free improvisation had "got me thinking about how I want my classroom to operate and how I can use music as mindfulness practice." Another student assented, noting how the class developed collaborative behaviors such as "taking turns to play and to sit back and listen and trying to meld with everyone else … I'm very excited about this."

Clearly, I cannot, from these comments, make predictions about my students' successful (or otherwise) adoption of free improvisation in their future classrooms. Perhaps the most I can do is to acknowledge their overall tone of positivity regarding various aspects of the activity. There is enough here to encourage me to do more free improvisation with my students, albeit, or perhaps especially in the context of a class focused largely on psychology and sociology. To this end, I take heart from the feedback from a student who, similar to some of my own thinking, said, "It would have been nice to have reflected more on the success of the improvisations, although maybe not doing it was part of the lovely thing about it—we spend so much time thinking in-depth, it's nice just playing."

A Wider Context—Life Skills and Learning Outcomes

As outlined at the start of this paper, I enjoy free improvisation and am an advocate for the ways of musicking and being that it nurtures. As such, it would be too lazy and circular for me to lean on my own reading of my students' responses to a voluntary feedback task that I set them in response to an activity in which I had asked them to participate, in attempting to determine the value of this improvisational intervention. While some confirmation bias is perhaps inevitable, I draw below on some language from my university's "Hub"—"the

University-wide general education program for all undergraduates" that "reflects Boston University's mission to educate students who are 'reflective, resourceful individuals ready to live, adapt, and lead in an interconnected world'" (Boston University 2022a). While this Hub initiative is aimed at undergraduates and my class were all graduates, the University's mission applies to all its students. Moreover, when discussing courses and curricula with colleagues and pitching them to school- and college-wide committees, it is helpful to have agreed-upon institutional language in which to ground assertions about the perceived and potential value of a course or its content. To this end, I now explore briefly how free improvisation aligns with and exemplifies certain Hub aims.

The Hub describes various skill domains and learning outcomes desirable for graduates. The domains with language that align with processes and outcomes of free improvisation are "Teamwork & Collaboration," and "Creativity/Innovation." These are defined at length on the Hub website (Boston University 2022b), so I have included only salient portions of text here. The rationale for "Teamwork & Collaboration" is presented in part, thus:

> Civic life in an increasingly interdependent world also calls more and more for the ability to collaborate with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives, build consensus, and compromise for the good of a broader purpose (Boston University 2022b)

Free improvisation requires what is described here. The language feels rather business-oriented in tone, but the concepts and behaviors nevertheless apply in freely improvised music making. As one of my students noted in their feedback on free improvisation, "This really guides collaboration because you learn to pick up on nonverbal cues and have a different type of connection with the students you're playing with than you typically would playing music in orchestra or band." Members of the class are all necessarily from different backgrounds, with a range of nationalities, cultures, and languages represented along with individual differences less visible and obvious. Students' musical and sonic perspectives are inevitably quite different, and in order to produce coherence, consonance, and tolerable dissonance, we must build consensus in sound and

compromise all the time. As Maud Hickey has noted, "free-improvisation ensembles offer a potential vehicle toward more creative and egalitarian music making" (2015, 442) than other contexts.

One learning outcome under "Teamwork & Collaboration" reads:

> Students will demonstrate an ability to use the tools and strategies of working successfully with a diverse group, such as assigning roles and responsibilities, giving and receiving feedback, and engaging in meaningful group reflection that inspires collective ownership of result. (Boston University 2022b)

Assigning roles and responsibilities happens nonverbally and in real time during free improvisation as students make and respond to the music being made. As one student recalled of his approach to the activity, "Sometimes I thought I was too present, and at other times I decided to sit back and then come more forward … It was great to get to know my peers!" Again, the terms in the Hub's descriptor are rather more commercially focused than those often deployed in music education; but it would be disingenuous to pretend they are not very present indeed in the activity of free improvisation. Non-verbal feedback takes place in the form of responses to one another's musical stimuli, and the class frequently engaged in short reflective discussion activities after the musicking, sharing (masked—due to COVID-19 restrictions) smiles, discussing how we all felt the music went, what were our various strategies for and experiences of taking part, and feeling a strong sense of collective ownership.

The domain of "Creativity/Innovation" is described in part by the Hub as follows:

> Creative activity is a source of deep human satisfaction and common good… Boston University graduates will have personal experience of taking risks, failing, and trying again; and, in this way, they will have developed the patience and persistence that enables creativity to come ultimately to fruition. (Boston University 2022b)

Free improvisation is a creative activity that provides deep human satisfaction and gently nurtures participants to contribute to the good of the group of which they are a vital part (Agawu 2016; Hickey 2009, 2015; Rose 2017). Hopefully, what my students did has inspired and will continue to inspire them to perpetuate that good among their own students. Students in my class expressed how free improvisation initially felt risky and

exposed; a perennial feature of improvising, though, is the cyclical process of failing, trying again, and thus developing persistence and patience with oneself and with others in the group. Patience can be exercised by, for instance, awaiting one's turn to contribute to the collective musical composition, in allowing others to finish their contribution, or overlooking one's learned sense of structure and direction in favor of where the collectively constructed composition goes next. Persistence can be developed by coming back to the free improvisation exercise week after week, determined to play more cohesively, more communicatively, and more empathically with peers (Hickey 2015).

The Hub's first learning outcome for "Creativity/Innovation" is as follows:

> Students will demonstrate understanding of creativity as a learnable, iterative process of imagining new possibilities that involves risk-taking, use of multiple strategies, and reconceiving in response to feedback, and will be able to identify individual and institutional factors that promote and inhibit creativity. (Boston University 2022b)

In our free improvisations in class, students who had not improvised in this way before, learned, by learning it together, that improvisation is learnable, and that the learning and creativity both comprise and result from iterative processes of participation (Rose 2017; Hickey 2015). Free improvisation requires that all participants imagine new possibilities and act in real time on those imaginings—such as singing a note or withholding a note, extending a sound, or trying an alternative vocalization. Operating in different spaces (e.g., the classroom, a stairwell, a park) and with different instruments (e.g., voice, one's primary instrument, or an instrument one has never played before) requires the use of different strategies, and—again—the feedback happens in real time, as well as in post-musicking discussions and in reflections such as those I solicited in writing and audio/video recordings. The class identified inhibiting factors to creativity, such as anxiety over playing the right notes and the perfectionism that comes with conservatory-trained musicians (Lupiáñez et al. 2022); one student commented that they "did notice that I was feeling a bit nervous and asking myself if I was good enough." We discussed potentially inhibiting institutional factors, too, such as grading rubrics, standardization in teaching and grading, and teachers untrained or inexperienced in improvisational musicking.

The Hub's second learning outcome for Creativity/Innovation reads:

> Students will be able to exercise their own potential for engaging in creative activity by conceiving and executing original work either alone or as part of a team (Boston University 2022b)

Creating and simultaneously executing original work are what the class did each and every time we made freely improvised music together. What's more, after only a few weeks of doing it, we were improvising with joy, alacrity, and abundance, in concert with one another and with the space around us. As one of the students reflected, "These brief moments to make music together were the highlights of my semester … making music for the sake of being present and sharing something together was really special."

Conclusions

The three goals I had in mind when adding free improvisation to a weekly three-hour graduate class on psychology and sociology in music education were 1) connect theory and practice around including free improvisation in my teaching, 2) model a reflexive teaching practice for my students, and 3) provide some reflections about how and why to include free improvisation in one's teaching. I believe I achieved these goals. Doing so was a symbiotic process and is necessarily unfinished; I plan to continue doing and learning from free improvisation activities with my students for as long as we find value in doing so.

The "why" of including free improvisation in teaching is deeply bound up with a sense of self as a musician and teacher that has been steadily and constantly evolving throughout my life—especially in live, synchronous, in-person pedagogical contexts. I think it is accurate to say that, as a teacher, I have devoted the most time and cognitive effort in my job to working on how and what to teach, and meeting the (assumed and stated) needs of students with whom I have worked. This article represents a first foray into consciously focusing on *who I am* as a teacher-musician—listening to my aforementioned pedagogical "voice of identity and integrity" (Palmer 1998, 30)—and trying to weave that understanding into nurturing the learning experiences of graduate student music teachers. It has been freeing and empowering to be more fully me as an educator, and to connect so

profoundly with students by doing so. Laing might describe this as me having found a modicum of "ontological security … experience[ing my] own being as real, alive, whole" (Laing 1960, 41). Scholars such as Waterman (1992) and Norton & Kille (1971) have called this eudaimonic, which Norton (1976) identifies as "living one's own truth [which] constitutes integrity, the consummate virtue" (8).

As both a teacher and a musician I am drawn to improvisation; moreover, I like to be well-prepared and warmed-up enough that I know I can improvise with my peers—fellow music makers, students, and in the case of the class examined herein, both. The final tenet that I gave students to guide our free improvisation was "trust yourself and others"; that is, I believe, at the core of successful improvisation and effective teaching. I recall James Jordan's (1999) affirmation, that, "the mortar of music is human trust (of self and others), belief in self and others, and love of self" (7); I suggest that "music" here could meaningfully be replaced with "free improvisation" or with "teaching" to read, "the mortar of teaching/ free improvisation is human trust (of self and others), belief in self and others, and love of self." Self-love here is not selfishness or narcissism (Pincus & Lukowitsky 2010), but rooted in the notion of love as practice (hooks 2000) and in the understanding that without adequate love and acknowledgement of self, I (and we) may be unable to adequately love others (Williamson 2007; Fromm 1956). In terms of teaching music, "teachers must invest the time and heart into getting to know our students as humans" (Lee & Smith 2023, 111); such pedagogy rooted in love is, moreover, "the only condition by which honest music making can occur" (Jordan 1999, 47). Furthermore, Jordan again exhorts music makers and music teachers to embrace their full self openly and honestly, for, "openness is the ability to recognize, accept, and trust oneself," adding that, "one's vulnerability allows another to experience a spirit and to engage a living soul through music [and/or through teaching]. A more important component of an artistic [or pedagogical] relationship simply does not exist" (Jordan 1999, 32).

Modeling this way of musicking, teaching, and being helped me meet one of my goals for this class, which holds particular value for my students as they imagine and prepare for their futures teaching and making music. As Wright and Kanellopoulos assert,

"Improvisation allows for a direct confrontation of learning as a search for self-transformation. Learning how to build our relationships with children and music: this is maybe the most fundamental value of learning through improvisation" (2010, 82). As numerous voices have urged, making music can, and arguably even should, emphasize the process, the doing, and the being together as we music; it is about profundity of process, over perfection of product (Elliott & Silverman 2015; Hickey 2015). I think the same is true of teaching. The experience and outcomes of teaching are necessarily different for each learner, so teachers must pay the utmost attention to being fully present in the present as we teach (Lee 2023). As James Jordan articulates about music (and which I am sure equally applies to teaching), "Soulful human beings create profound music, regardless of the level of their musical achievement. Such music is, at the same time, honest, direct, and speaks in the most direct way to all that hear it" (Jordan 1999, 9). Vulnerability of being, and non-hierarchization of space, modeled in this article through free improvisation (Hickey 2015), are vital and exciting parts of making and teaching music.

Beyond what I anticipated, and in line with what I had hoped could happen with these classroom experiments, I derived professional, musical, and soulful satisfaction from the music making and from the impact it appears to have had on students. I feel encouraged to try similar activities again (Smith 2022). This aligns with my interest (Smith 2020, 2017), in aspiring to what Elliott (2020) sees as "a eudaimonic way of life […] a life that pursues ongoing self-growth and happiness (in the fullest sense of human flourishing) that follows from critically reflective activities that an ethical person believes and feels are personally and communally valuable" (110).

About the Author

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