

Theorizing Improvisation as a form of Critical Pedagogy in Music Education

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Novelist and scholar Nathaniel Mackey, whose own fictional writing style is heavily informed by a range of improvisatory musical practices, uses the term “paracritical hinge” to refer to concepts that permit “flow between disparate orders of articulation [...] between statement and meta-statement, analysis and expressivity, criticism and performance, music and literature, and so forth” (211). In the present essay, I suggest that improvisation can function as a “paracritical hinge” between the fields of critical pedagogy and public music education, fostering the development of critical thinking, listening, and performance skills in the classroom and providing opportunities to examine alternative forms of social interaction and community-building through real-time modes of music making. To this end, I will review the Ontario music curriculum, critically examining the teaching materials that are prepared for and presented to student teachers. I will outline what I see as a considerable problem in the curriculum documents, and the new teacher resources: their lack of mention, discussion, or acknowledgement of improvisational music as a legitimate basis for music teaching in the classroom. As the Ministry guidelines state: “Teaching approaches should be informed by the findings of current research related to creativity and arts education” (“Arts 1-8” 37). Through an examination of Ontario Ministry of Education resources, I will identify what the curriculum requires of both teacher and student, and investigate ways to further stimulate individual talent and creativity through the incorporation of musical improvisation and so-called “extended techniques.” I will propose an alternative model of music pedagogy which encourages students to develop their own forms of creative expression through individual discovery of sound and environment, with a focus placed on student-centered learning, which assists in the development of problem-solving and critical thinking skills. These expressions could include group and individual study of instrumental techniques, and exploration of unorthodox and unusual methods of practice on instruments, including performing on an instrument in a manner for which it was not originally designed—or the employment of what are known as extended techniques. Examples of current research related to the incorporation of improvisation pedagogy in music classrooms include the work of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project. ICASP partners with a variety of community organizations to implement improvisation-related programs including *Jazz in the Schools* and *Play Who You Are*, programs aimed at fostering a musical, communicative, and exploratory pedagogy through improvisation (see Cunsolo Willox et al).

The Hall-Dennis Report (1968), a strong denunciation of what the Ontario Provincial Committee of Aims and Objectives of Education in the Schools of Ontario believed were uncreative practices in Ontario schools, advocated for these types of changes through recommendations for educational reform, many of which resonate with my own ideas in this paper. It did not, however, include strategies by which educators could incorporate these recommendations into the classroom according to subject. Though the report significantly affected the system of evaluation, namely through the implementation of summative projects in place of examinations, it was regarded as highly controversial and met with considerable critique, being referred to as “permissive nonsense” (“Recensions” 139), and more abrasively dismissed by James Daly, who stated “the best that can be said for the Hall-Dennis Report is that it is a bad report with some good in it” (1). In the decades since the Hall-Dennis Report was released, several changes and added programs have been enacted which allow for greater exploration of sound and innovation within Ontario music classrooms. However, most of these activities remain extra-curricular in nature, such as contemporary style percussion groups, and the use of constructed instruments in student performances. These programs, while invaluable to the creative development of students in music classrooms, are often limited to single workshop days, so students lack a consistent exposure to the exploratory and communicative practice that improvisation encourages. The current curriculum continues to reflect a regimented protocol of instrument selection, technique, ensemble, repertoire, theory and performance. I am interested in investigating ways that improvisation can be used as a pedagogical tool to ensure daily creative activity in the public school classroom.

Through a framework of critical pedagogy, I will examine hegemonic processes within existing forms of music education, processes that work to naturalize particular systems of musical logic and models of social behaviour. These systems, which include technical and instrumental “correctness,” and mandated group behaviour in musical

performance, cause students to internalize values which stress a respect for authority, punctuality, cleanliness, docility and conformity. What the students learn from the formally sanctioned content of the curriculum is much less important than what they learn from the ideological assumptions embedded in the school's three message systems: the system of curriculum; the system of classroom pedagogical styles; and the system of evaluation (Giroux 29).

Using the three message systems identified by Giroux as a framework, the present essay theorizes several ways in which musical improvisation can be incorporated into the classroom, serving as a "paracritical hinge" that enables music pedagogy to function as a potent site for critical pedagogy and vice versa.

Critical pedagogy is often a radical combination of ideologies and beliefs which encourage students and teachers alike to challenge oppression. Critical pedagogy seeks to challenge—and dismantle—hegemony as defined by Antonio Gramsci, namely the "naturalizing" of oppression and societal inequities. Although there are many important theorists of critical pedagogy, the leading figure in the field is Paulo Freire, who initiated the academic declaration toward critical engagement and "unlearning" with his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire's theories about "banking education" and "problem-posing education" provide an excellent binary framework for my comparative analysis between pedagogical methods: "Whereas banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (68). Banking education promotes the idea that everyone is supposed to have the same, "correct" responses after learning the same, "correct" techniques. Problem-posing education encourages students to think for themselves, even if their responses are "out of the box" or controversial; it promotes the development of unique ideas, and encourages all students to contribute to a discussion. The challenge becomes how to educate using problem-posing, intentional, conscious pedagogical methods.

"Whose interests are being served?": The System of Curriculum

Giroux's first of three ideological message systems to be theorized as a site for critical pedagogy through musical improvisation is the system of curriculum in public music education. Whose interests are being served in the current music curricula taught in Ontario—the teachers' or the students'? The ministry guidelines state that

The music curriculum is intended to help students develop an understanding and appreciation of music, as well as the ability to create and perform it, so that they will be able to find in music a lifelong source of enjoyment and personal satisfaction. Emphasis should be placed on encouraging students to become active participants in composing music, exploring ideas through music, responding to music, and performing. ("Arts 1-8" 16)

In the Ontario Arts curriculum documents, there is *no mention of improvisation at all* from grades 1 to 8, and very little afterward; in the rare instances where improvisation is discussed, it is framed solely within the context of jazz. Considerable value continues to be invested in students learning and performing Western music. There is presently little focus on individuality, as the focus is instead placed on group dynamic and progress. Improvisation within the classroom is generally discouraged in favour of text-based, technique-oriented practice and performance. A high emphasis is often placed on memory—the memorization of keys, phrases, chords and positions, notes, fingerings, rhythmic motifs; the focus is placed on learning the actual sheet music "verbatim," and developing the proper technique for playing the music as a group. This results in a situation in which many students cannot confidently perform on their instrument without printed music to follow. Keith Sawyer elaborates:

The current musical culture in Western countries—one in which a highly skilled instrumentalist may be completely incapable of improvising—is historically and culturally unique. Today, in Western cultures, improvisation is almost completely absent from the high art tradition and, consequently, is almost completely absent from the music education curriculum [...] Improvisation should come first and should remain at the core of music education throughout the later years of increasing expertise. The ability to read sheet music and to perform a written score flawlessly should come rather late in one's musical education. ("Improvisation" 1)

While Western notation is a remarkably flexible and nuanced form of notation that has successfully transmitted musical ideas for centuries, it presents many pedagogical challenges in its complexity, as this style of notation channels thought processes in a linear and standardized way. The vertical placement of letter-identifiable notes on the staves to indicate pitch combinations, the grouping of beats, and the obvious opening and closing dynamic markings (crescendos and decrescendos), can be easily visually contextualized, while the shapes of the clefs, notes, rests, and accidentals have no morphological connection to the fingerings, sound, shape and form of each individual instrument, and there are many instruments which this standardized system of notation represents. The multiple “concert” pitches of the instruments are confusing for students, creating difficulties in learning how to successfully interpret Western musical notation to produce the correct notes when playing in groups. Students are also reading most parts in the treble clef, promoting a dominant treble clef literacy, which has diminished most musicians’ ability to read the bass, alto, and tenor clefs accurately.

In music classrooms, there is room for a wider variety of techniques, approaches, and thought processes, including the use of graphic notations or even the development of student-developed forms of notation. In addition to providing much needed accommodations of varying learning styles in the classroom, many graphic notations include specific instructions from the composer, which can provide a form of structure for students who prefer to work within parameters, and help to ease students into exploratory musical practices. Another way to stimulate musical conversation and foster a sense of community in the classroom would be to have students perform their own compositions or improvisational pieces, without notated music. This would provide an opportunity for students to develop insights about the similarities and differences between how they perform their own music and how they perform the music of others. Students could also be encouraged to use something other than traditional musical instruments to produce music. If, as the past half-century of Western music history so clearly demonstrates (as well as the innumerable modes of music-making around the world that use all manner of resonating objects as instruments), any sound can be musical, students can produce sounds in whatever way they choose, be it through their bodies or external “found objects.” Indeed, using the ear and the voice can accommodate all learning styles, including visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, and should be adequately developed regardless of which instrument a student plays. Having students use their bodies as instruments, through vocal work and also “body percussion,” ensures that every student has their own instrument, one with which they can develop unique and specific techniques, at least as a basis for learning the process of how to develop these skills on external instruments. Encouraging musical practice with bodily sourced sounds also fosters self-interpretation and a form of musical self-discovery for the students. Investigating the ways their individual bodies can resonate, accentuate, control dynamic and pitch, and respond to the sounds around them, can provide students with a unique perspective on how they contribute to the sonic environment they are in, and more broadly, how they are capable of contributing and engaging in musical dialogue, with others and with themselves.

The Ontario Ministry of Education has made an ambitious declaration with their 2008 slogan: “Reach every student.” In Ontario, teachers are strongly encouraged to construct lesson plans that meet the requirements for student learning accommodations, to ensure that all students are learning and retaining as effectively as possible: “Whatever the specific ways in which the requirements outlined in the expectations are implemented in the classroom, they must, wherever possible, be inclusive and reflect the diversity of the student population and the population of the province” (“Arts 1-8” 11). These diversities may include physical and mental disabilities, behavioural disorders, learning challenges, and learning styles. Diversities also exist in the profile of the student population including language, background, race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, and age. Through musical improvisation, these diversities can be acknowledged, negotiated, and appreciated, as students can express a personal narrative through music, creating the possibility for transcultural exchange and understanding. George Lewis describes improvisation as “a social location inhabited by a considerable number of present-day musicians [...] Individual improvisers are now able to reference an intercultural establishment of techniques, styles, aesthetic attitudes, antecedents, and networks of cultural and social practice” (234).

Each contributor can draw on and express their own cultural repertoires, negotiating different identities through musical dialogue without erasing all the differences. In this way, otherwise culturally isolated students may find common ground. Using improvisational methods as a form of classroom accommodation will enhance the musical learning experience of every student, regardless of age, background, or need. At a time when educational resources

are diminishing, improvisation has the potential to enable students from divergent musical, cultural, and social backgrounds to contribute and learn in a way that is beneficial for them, as listening, thinking, and acting both musically and critically are the only real requirements.

“Reach Every Student”: The System of Pedagogical Style

The second ideological system identified by Giroux is the system of pedagogy, which in a music classroom is often an example of the oppressive teacher-student relationship referred to in the banking theories of critical pedagogy: the teacher (conductor) stands at the front of the class and instructs the students on when and how to make sounds on their “selected” (more often assigned) instruments right down to details such as posture, breathing, fingering, etc. There is right and there is wrong, and the wrongs are singled out repeatedly until they are made right and there is conformity among the students. There is limited communication between the performer and the conductor, generally one-way, which is not true dialogue; the performers are bound by the conductor and their orchestral peers, to contribute to the performance so as not to draw negative attention to themselves. Ira Shor, another innovator in the field of critical pedagogy, offers an analysis of language correction which provides an excellent analogy to conductors of music classes:

Another practice is the teacher’s habit of interrupting a speaking student at any moment, to summarize, paraphrase or rephrase the student’s speech in correct usage, formal syntax, or the conceptual vocabulary of the teacher’s specialty. The students are not allowed to interrupt each other or the teacher, which is a rule of discourse obviously violated by the culture of sabotage. So, there is a behavioural expectation in class that after a student speaks the teacher will translate the student utterance into an official form of language. These discourse habits stand in the way of provoking dialogue in the classroom. They make students into persons who cannot interpret themselves. (158)

When conducting, teachers are directing the entire group through a selected, composed piece of music, employing notated and copied scores as the guide. An emphasis is placed on the whole group getting through the piece with little or no error; when errors do occur—wrong notes, lost tempo, etc.—most often the teacher isolates the section to correct the misplay. Improvisation can effectively be conducted, but even a conducted improvisation leaves substantial room for creative agency on the part of the performers. If a group of musicians operates on the understanding that there are no wrong notes, only different musical choices, the entry points of musicians into the musical conversation are based on willing participation, not instrumental requirement, and sounds can be produced however and with whatever the student wants. In music instruction, varying teaching methods to include improvisation and extended techniques provides opportunities for students to expand on their own unique ideas, in addition to practicing and performing the music of others and learning “proper” instrumental techniques. As Scott Thomson suggests,

compared to other musical practices, improvisation can provide the optimal conditions in which multifarious instrumentation and methodologies can be accommodated; not only are conventional, unconventional, and invented instruments permissible sound sources, but they can also be played in the same ensemble in countless ways and combinations. Instrumental techniques in collective improvisation are not necessarily valued for being “played properly.” (3)

This view is supported by Christopher Small: “Musicality is often killed by the demands for ever greater technical proficiency; many young instrumentalists and singers would be far better musicians were they less obsessed with technical matters” (*Music, Society, Education* 193).

The problem is that students are accustomed to following the text and proper techniques in instrumental music performance; they are not used to committing to the social dynamic and each other. As Small indicates: “To improvise, then, is to establish a different set of human relationships, a different kind of society, from that established by fully literate musicking” (296).

If we accept Christopher Small's proposition that all acts of "musicking" result in the formation of social structures (*Common Tongue* 69-70), what kinds of social structures are being formed from the improvisatory methods of music making and music pedagogy that I am advocating? What are the social implications of a pedagogical method that starts with the assumption that there are no musical mistakes and all sounds are equal? Relationships are constructed between the musicians (students) and between sounds; if no sound is "better" than another, and the contributions of every member of the class are valued equally, improvisatory modes of music making offer unique opportunities to enact de-centred, musically-articulated social relationships and, by extension, unique opportunities to examine broader issues of social discourse, social interaction, and even social justice, through music. The question of direction and leadership becomes relevant: should there be a leader? While the students' responses may differ from the response of the teacher, a number of subsidiary questions would ensue in the minds of the students: could we take turns being leader? Who is going to be the leader first? What if there is no leader? How can we make music together in a classroom and as a non-hierarchical society when everyone is, at least in theory, an equal and integral member? Critical pedagogy suggests that students and teachers alike need to explore such ideas not only in theory, but also in practice.

Paulo Freire was an ardent advocate for increased dialogue within pedagogical methods; he believed students should have an equal opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions, both with their peers and their instructor, and that they should be participants in, rather than recipients of, a delivered curriculum. He states:

The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men [sic] in the process of permanent liberation. (40)

As Freire established, praxis is a combination of theory and practice, or the act of putting knowledge and theory into practice. In my view, communication and dialogue are the best ways to achieve pedagogical and societal transformation. Heble and Waterman, both co-investigators with the ICASP project, suggest that "musical improvisation needs to be understood as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action" (3). The democratic, dialogic imperative of using improvisation as a form of critical pedagogy creates classroom communities that encourage contribution to discussion, both verbal and musical. This exemplifies the idea of improvisation functioning as a "paracritical hinge" between critical pedagogy and music education. The discourses surrounding critical pedagogy and improvisatory pedagogical methods share many of the same descriptive adjectives: liberating, flexible, communicative, dialogical, without boundaries. Both critical pedagogy and improvisation pedagogy share somewhat utopian ideals regarding the transformation and democratic liberation of education systems and the students within them, and offer the potential to de-centre hierarchies that exist in classroom relationships. Moving towards a more fluid, improvisatory model of public music education may offer an opportunity to enact a more dialogical model of society—maybe even a democratic or egalitarian model of society—in the classroom.

In music education, the possibilities for dialogical liberation are vast, with potential subjects for discussion ranging from genres, bands, instruments, titles, medium, location, and influence, to the implications of the music for gender, class, and race politics. Music performance and instruction also offer unique opportunities for instrumental dialogue. This is particularly true of improvisatory modes of performance in which students can express their own creative voices through a process of dialogue and musical negotiation. Writing about dialogue within critical pedagogy, Ira Shor provides an excellent analogy to improvised music:

Dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum. It is not a "free space," where you may do what you want. Dialogue takes place inside some kind of program and context. These conditioning factors create tension in achieving goals that we set for dialogic education. To achieve the goals of transformation, dialogue implies responsibility, directiveness, determination, discipline, objectives. Nevertheless, a dialogical situation implies the absence of authoritarianism. Dialogue means a permanent tension in the relation between authority and liberty. But, in this tension, authority continues to be because it has authority vis-a-vis permitting student

freedoms which emerge, which grow and mature precisely because authority and freedom learn self-discipline. Something more: A dialogical setting does not mean that everyone involved in it has to speak! Dialogue does not have a goal or a requirement that all people in the class must say something even if they have nothing to say! (102)

The analogy with improvised music is clear: improvised modes of music-making can create a space within the music classroom for the dialogical exchange of musical ideas, de-centering authority in musically and pedagogically productive ways. In most other subjects in which the student speaks, writes, problem-solves, and reads, their assessment is based on clarity and coherence. Music students do not have a voice in the same way; their voice is generally mediated by their individual instrument; often one which is, as I suggested earlier, selected for them. They nonetheless have to learn specific techniques, exercises and pieces for that instrument. The only real clarity they are afforded is based on standards the teacher sets for performance ability. Students can fail due to lack of communication in a music class because their playing is not as good as their speaking, reading, or writing skills. Students are being instructed on how to communicate, and in general they cannot communicate in any other manner in the music classroom. Their communication is viewed as being either correct or incorrect, never as a unique contribution to the building of a community. Using improvisation as a form of communication eliminates this problem because there is no pre-established “grammatical” accuracy, and there are no negative consequences for contributing, whether politely or out of turn; the contribution *is* the communication.

“What happened?”: The System of Evaluation

The last of the three message systems identified by Giroux is the system of evaluation and assessment. The issue of evaluation poses challenges for the critical pedagogue and music instructor alike, as methods of assessment and evaluation can result in the alienation of learners, undermining the spirit of dialogue so vital to critical pedagogy. The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario defines assessment as “the formal and informal process of gathering information on student performance achievement... strategies may include written tests, oral questioning, observation of performance, quizzes, assignments, student self-assessment, and peer assessment” (“Adjusting” 8). In rare circumstances where self-assessment is “allowed,” these opportunities only exist because the instructor allows them—a power dynamic still exists. As Henry Giroux points out, “While students may find themselves in a position occasionally in which they can evaluate each other, the unquestioned source of praise and reproof is the teacher” (33). This creates an unspoken and anti-dialogical system of evaluation in music classrooms, where grades can become a product and reflection of a student’s attitude and behaviour, rather than ability and understanding. Giroux again elaborates on this point: “Social relationships in the traditional classroom are based upon power relations inextricably linked to the teacher’s allotment and distribution of grades. Grades become in many cases the ultimate discipline instruments by which the teacher imposes his [sic] desired values, behaviour patterns and beliefs upon students” (38). These impositions from the teacher can be oppressive for students as they are unable to communicate or express their own values and beliefs for fear of punishment. Improvisation and critical pedagogy give students the power to speak and be heard, without having to be officiated or reprimanded by an instructor; they allow students to be both musically and dialogically free. However, in such a setting, freedom is equivalent to responsibility. For many students, the burden of creative agency can be deeply disconcerting. Indeed, many students would rather be told exactly what to do and ensure a clear definition of success instead of thinking (and acting critically) which has the potential to cause confrontation or discomfort for others including the teacher. In other words, “they prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom to the creative communion produced by freedom and even the very pursuit of freedom” (Freire 32). Giroux explains: “Social relations in the classroom that glorify the teacher as the expert, the dispenser of knowledge, end up crippling student imagination and creativity; in addition, such approaches teach students more about the legitimacy of passivity, than about the need to examine critically the lives they lead” (64). When told to “do what you want,” students are afraid because they do not know what they are *really* allowed to do; instead of getting into trouble for doing something they are unsure of, they may not do anything. Improvisation requires students to take responsibility for their actions, as the sounds that are produced cannot be erased or undone; they become critically engaged with listening and responding, the fundamental techniques of improvisatory music. More importantly, improvisation forms a social structure that necessitates shared commitment, sincerity, and trust between the performers. Commitment and shared responsibility are crucial to the success of improvisatory

performance—to support each other, whether the choice is to “follow the rules” of suggested parameters, tonality, rhythmic groove, etc., or to break the rules. The important thing is to commit to the choice once it is made.

Standardized pedagogical methods lead to standardized assessment; how can we fairly assess the subjective nature of improvisatory musical creativity? It seems a shame to me to suppress creativity and varying forms of intelligence in arts classrooms simply because they are difficult to evaluate using rubric-based guidelines. The Teachers' Federation elaborates on this point: “Standardized tests measure only a few of the many intelligences students possess. This inherent bias disadvantages those students who prefer to learn using intelligences that are not tested. This limitation may explain why gender, culture, and language differences emerge as factors contributing to the spread in scores” (“Adjusting” 9). Of the eight identified forms of intelligence as defined by Howard Gardner, written standardized testing is only geared toward three: linguistic, logic-mathematical and less frequently, spatial (Gardner 8). Students who learn through any of the other five forms of intelligence—musical, bodily/kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal and intrapersonal—are not given a fair opportunity to exemplify their knowledge or showcase their skills to attain a high level of achievement. Critical pedagogy promotes methods of assessment that are “centered on dialogic interactions so that the roles of teacher and learner are shared and all voices are validated” (Keesing-Styles 11) and involve students as “active participants in the assessment process and in the generation of assessment criteria [...] assessments are subsequently more likely to reflect the diversity of students and realities of their lives if the students themselves are engaged in a dialogic process of criteria generation” (14). One way to implement this type of dialogic assessment is to collectively reflect on and discuss the nature and outcome of musical improvisations: to ask “what happened” with regards to the entrance of voices, texture, build up, mood, and perhaps most importantly, listening and participation in the musical “conversation.” In addition to the musical implications, we can also discuss the social implications of these patterns of musical interaction, which provides an opportunity to enact a mode of critical pedagogy. Through a discussion of the social and musical responses and realizations that occurred in a musical improvisation, students can answer potentially life-transforming questions. What kinds of relationships did we just enter into? What do these relationships say about us, about life, and about the musical dynamic? These types of critical engagement can be assessed through both written and oral reflection, and can be stimulated individually, or through discussion within the group. Critical pedagogy offers the opportunity for education to be enlightening, inspiring and transformative for the student. As students are able to work, contribute, and be assessed under conditions where they can realize that a number/letter grade is not going to define them as a person, they are able to learn without the burden and pressure of achieving the highest standardized assessment level.

In the Ontario public education system, an emphasis is placed on rubrics and grading schemes, which I believe has a direct effect on classroom learning, both as a group and individually. The Ministry of Education guidelines state, “the overall expectations describe in general terms the knowledge and skills that students are expected to demonstrate by the end of each grade [...] The specific expectations describe the expected knowledge and skills in greater detail [...] Taken together, the overall and specific expectations represent the mandated curriculum” (“Arts 1-8” 11). The Ontario Ministry of Education dictates in broad categories the requirements for student learning; “knowledge and understanding,” “thinking,” “communication,” and “application” (“Achievement Charts” 6-8). Within each of these categories exists four “levels” of success and effectiveness, ranging from “limited” to “thorough,” with level three—“considerable”—being the ministry-expected standard. My perception is that these sub-systems are not the problem; the difficulties stem from a combination of the teacher's requirement to select a precise level in each category for each student. Further to this are two crucially important classroom details: 1) it is difficult for a teacher to effectively evaluate every student in a current public classroom, as there are now often upwards of forty students per class, and 2) because such a high emphasis is placed on grades, students tend to suppress their own creativity, opinions, and ideas, in order to ensure success relative to Ministry standards. In the arts, and especially in music, these constraints result in the replication of one particular system of musical logic and related techniques, derived primarily—if not exclusively—from the Western music tradition, leaving little room for creative agency or improvisatory discoveries among students. As Christopher Small puts it, “It is the music of this tradition that is taught, performed, analysed and researched, in schools, conservatoires and the music faculties of Western universities, and it is this which is regarded as the highest achievement of the human race in the art of sound, of which all others are of best approximations, at worst corruptions” (*Common Tongue* 164).

Teachers need to break this habit and become involved in dialogical music activities, encouraging improvisation and experiential learning which may, in turn, break some of the dependence on the mandated curriculum and fear of the education system. As Keith Sawyer argues,

One might suggest a more incremental change to music education: to keep it essentially as is, but while carefully introducing some improvisational practice into the current music education curriculum. But this would be a mistake. It would allow the core flaw at the heart of our musical culture to persist—the implicit assumption that the nature of musical performance is to accurately execute a composer’s past vision. Instead, we need a transformation of our musical culture, one that upends the relationship between performer and composer, one that places the performer at an equal status with the composer, and one in which both performer and composer contribute creatively to music. (“Improvisation” 1)

Broadening the understanding of what is considered acceptable as achievement in learning may help to change the situation. The Ontario Ministry expectations as listed in the Achievement Charts for the Arts, Grades 1-8 are as follows: imagining, creating, presenting, performing, reflecting, analysing, and responding. Through the employment of any improvisatory musical practice, the expectations and required standards can be easily achieved by each student, and assessed by the teacher. The Ministry states,

As students engage in creating and performing music, they will learn to generate and focus their thoughts in a musical form; explore and experiment with instruments, found or environmental sounds, and compositional forms and techniques that are appropriate for their developmental stage; revise and refine their work; and present and share their composition or performance with others. Through creating and performing, students will experience the joy of making music, create compositions that express and communicate their ideas and feelings, learn to identify and solve problems, and apply their knowledge of the elements of music both independently and in cooperation with others. (“Arts 1-8” 19)

It is encouraging that the Ministry feels it is important to consistently develop the curriculum to include more creativity and expression in music classes; however, if music teachers continue to base their practice around standardized forms of composition, notation, instrumentation, orchestration and performance repertoire, then these developments become redundant. Improvisatory modes of music making offer unique and innovative ways to not only satisfy these requirements, but also to enact a form of critical pedagogy through a process of critical dialogue, musical and otherwise.

Conclusion

Improvisatory modes of music making within the classroom can be used as a form of critical pedagogy to liberate students from the current text dependence and “correct” instrumental technique in Ontario music classrooms. As Susan Allen suggests, improvisation “is about the liberation of the individual musician from traditional hierarchical composer-performer and conductor-performer relationships—a liberation which empowers performers to create a unique, unrepeatable work of music” (8). It is important for students to learn about responsibility and commitment, to engage in meaningful social interactions, and to develop the ability to think creatively and critically. Improvisation fosters all of these skills. I am not suggesting that improvisation should replace existing music curricular methods entirely, but rather that improvisatory modes of music making are essential to the creative development of students and should supplement existing text-based approaches to music pedagogy. Moreover, the incorporation of musical improvisation into the classroom can be done in a manner that will satisfy Ontario Ministry of Education expectations. If music teachers and students engage in more dialogical and less hierarchical forms of learning, a sense of community based upon trust and respect will develop, resulting in effective communication between students and teachers and an assurance that every student is reached. Through the incorporation of improvisation in the music classroom, each of the three message systems as defined by Giroux can promote ideologies of dialogical liberation through curriculum, classroom pedagogical style, and evaluation. While the first two systems might be rephrased as what we teach and how we teach, they ought to lead us to examine an unstated, but critical, third question: *why* we teach. I believe we teach to encourage people to question, and potentially enlighten them to change, their lives—their social and personal relationships, their environments, their goals, and their contributions and effects in the world.

Teaching music can help to develop strong work ethics and an understanding of time management. Music teaches the importance of dedication and practice, and it can generate self-confidence and a feeling of accomplishment, even as it shows students the cumulative benefits of sincere commitment. Incorporating improvisation in the music classroom has the potential to build communities, dismantle artificial hierarchies, create equality, foster unique exploration and identity of self through music, critically examine principles of social justice, and promote acknowledgement and acceptance of diversity, all through a dialogical, liberating framework.

Addendum

This paper was written based on my reflections of the materials which were presented to me as a teacher-student for music in intermediate/senior music classrooms (grades 7-12). As a graduate student with no classroom teaching experience, I was exposed to many new ideas regarding improvisatory pedagogical methods, and was highly influenced by the work of ICASP and the many brilliant minds expanding classroom music practices in Ontario. This further motivated me to confront the low status held by improvisation among the current standard resources for teaching music, and to critique the quality of the experiences afforded to both teachers and students when they depend only upon these resources.

In September 2012 I took a position teaching music for JK-7 at three elementary schools: 31 classes of students, over 600 in total. This position was created as a response to regular classroom teachers' concerns regarding not having enough preparatory time; music classes provide an additional forty minutes a week for each teacher, and give the students a music class that they would not otherwise have. This is a pilot program, and has so far been considered successful.

The realities that I have encountered in this position in the last twelve weeks would comprise another paper altogether. This is to say that the above paper does not fully convey what actually goes on within the school—most prominently, these schools do not have musical instruments, so many of my points are irrelevant. The lack of continuity that results from teaching each class for forty minutes per week is devastating, and my inability to accurately remember six hundred names at three different schools has created a lack of personal rapport that I regret. As most other teachers in the school regard me as their “relief,” both my time and my position are not always treated with a level of respect I would consider professional. This is to say nothing of the challenges I face, for example, with each class's students with special needs, and often with their educational assistants, who use this “prep” period as a break time.

My exploration of alternative and improvisatory music teaching methods is the backbone of my survival in this position. Without this, my students would likely be completing worksheets, interacting with minimal creative input, and modeling the same behaviour as in any other studious environment. Instead, I have created a consistent flow of lessons in which the students are critically thinking about and discussing sound and environment, creating sounds with their mouths and their bodies, learning intricate rhythms and time systems simply by counting and listening, and engaging in respectful dialogues about their musical experiences. They are learning about the many different ways a simple object can make sounds, and how to appreciate that music can be found everywhere and in anything they perceive to be musical. Their assessment is based on participatory and respectful interaction, and a patient, thoughtful accumulation of musical techniques and elements learned exclusively from the sounds they are making with their own bodies, and as one body within the classroom.

My position in the school may only exist to relieve other teachers of these students briefly so that they may have more time to plan, but I cherish that time and attempt to share, as much as I can with these students, the value of creativity and uniqueness in all forms of thinking. What I have learned from my short experience teaching classroom music is enough to make me question many of my own arguments, but as I continue to reflect on my daily experiences, I am gaining new insight into many of the reasons I wrote this paper in the first place. I hope to soon augment these reflections with an essay describing the classroom teaching experience itself.

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