

# Informal music learning, improvisation and teacher education

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*This paper<sup>1</sup> explores firstly the sense in which improvisation might be conceived of as an informal music education process and, secondly, the effects of a course in free improvisation on student teachers' perceptions in relation to themselves as musicians, music as a school subject and children as musicians. The results of a study conducted in two Greek universities are presented. Using a narrative methodology, examples of data from the reflective diaries or learning journals which 91 trainee teachers kept as part of their participation in an improvisation module are presented and discussed. The argument is made that improvisation, as a particular type of informal music learning process, has an important role to play in fostering the qualities required of teachers to work with informal pedagogies in music education. Furthermore, we would suggest that such musical experiences might gradually lead to the development of a critical perspective on both music education theories and practices. Improvisation might emerge as a moment and a practice of rupture with linearity of progress, working against reification of knowledge and glorification of received information. The findings suggest that improvisation might offer a route for creating an intimate, powerful, evolving dialogue between students' identities as learners, their attitudes towards children and their creative potential, and the interrelationships of the notions of expressive technique and culture, thus becoming 'an act of transcendence' (Allsup, 1997, p. 81). We propose that the issue of connecting informal learning and improvisation might be resolved by regarding improvisation as an exemplary case of creating a communicative context where most representations/conceptualisations/struggles to solve problems are left implicit. Such experiences for pupils and teachers alike might further extend the social and personal effectiveness of informal learning as music pedagogy.*

## **Introduction: Informal learning and the development of a critical perspective towards music education**

At the age of four, a child I knew drew extraordinarily vibrant, imaginative trees. Crayon, chalk, colored pen, and silly putty were all useful. These trees were remarkable in how clearly they showed the bulbous lobes and branchy veins of individual leaves in a kind of cubist, all-the-way-around view that would have delighted Picasso. Meticulous observation of real trees, and a certain daring that is characteristic of four-year-olds, combined to produce these striking artworks.

By the age of six, this child had gone through a year of first grade and had begun drawing lollipop trees just like the other kids. Lollipop trees consist of a single blob of green, representing the general mass of leaves with details obliterated, stuck up on top of a brown stick, representing the tree trunk. Not the sort of place real frogs would live.

Another child, age eight, complained of the day her third-grade teacher pretended that negative numbers don't exist. While the class was doing subtraction tables, a boy asked, 'What's 3 take-away 5?' and the teacher insisted that there is no such thing. The girl objected, 'But everyone knows it's minus 2!' The schoolteacher said, 'This is third grade and you're not supposed to know about those things!' (Nachmanovitch, 1990, pp. 115–116)

What is the responsibility of music teacher education as a process of preparation for countering the stance towards education that the foregoing excerpt so vividly illustrates? The purpose of this paper is to address one particular aspect of this critical question, by examining the role of music improvisation in music teacher education. We will present the results of a study conducted in two Greek universities with student teachers which was designed firstly to investigate the sense in which improvisation might be conceived of as an informal music education process and secondly the effects of such a course in free improvisation on student teachers' perceptions of themselves as musicians, music as a school subject and children as musicians. Our study is based on data from the reflective diaries or learning journals of 91 trainee teachers kept as part of their participation in an improvisation university module.

We would argue here that improvisation, as a particular type of informal music learning process, has an important role to play in fostering the qualities required of teachers to work with informal pedagogies in music education. Furthermore, we would suggest that such musical experiences might gradually lead to the development of a critical perspective on both music education theories and practices. Improvisation might emerge as a moment and a practice of rupture with linearity of progress, working against reification of knowledge and glorification of received information. The findings suggest that improvisation might offer a route for creating an intimate, powerful, evolving dialogue between students' identities as learners, their attitudes towards children and their creative potential, and the interrelationships of the notions of expressive technique and culture, thus becoming 'an act of transcendence' (Allsup, 1997, p. 81). Such experiences for pupils and teachers alike might further extend the social and personal effectiveness of informal learning as music pedagogy.

### **Informal learning**

Awareness has grown during the last 30 years that important learning occurs in situations other than the classroom (Rice, 1985; Bailey & Doubleday, 1990; Eraut, 2000; Colley *et al.*, 2003; Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007). Such learning has been described variously as non-formal or informal, drawing a distinction between this kind of learning and formal learning. Formal learning may be described as that which occurs in a traditional pedagogic environment where clarity of goals and procedures are clearly defined in advance and where learning results in certification or assessment. Non-formal learning occurs outside traditional learning environments, is not the result of deliberation and does not normally

result in certification (Eraut, 2000). It is important to note here however that aural and oral modes of learning should not automatically be thought of as informal just on the basis of their difference from the formality of traditional western models of learning (Nettl, 2007). In his critique of the theoretical rationale that underpins Green's (2008a) study of informal musical learning processes as classroom music pedagogy, Allsup (2008) argued for the need to draw a distinction between 'informal learning' and 'informalism', emphasised that 'researchers must be careful not to make equivalent the notion of informal learning *ipso facto* with that of popular music' (p. 3) and maintained that informality does not automatically lead to openness and to the transformation of classrooms into spaces for the development of democratic thinking and practice. Folkestad (2006, p. 135) has also suggested that: 'Formal – informal should not be regarded as a dichotomy, but rather as the two poles of a continuum; in most learning situations, both these aspects of learning are in various degrees present and interacting'. We suggest that informal learning could be understood as a deliberate attempt to be immersed in intense situations of non-formal learning, and therefore results in the creation of non-traditional social learning environments, combining interactive, non-linear and self-directed processes. Thus, the introduction of informal learning in music education raises interesting questions regarding definition of the term 'informal' in pedagogic contexts in music, the extent to which informal learning is or is not linked to particular musical genres and the potential of informal learning to facilitate openness and democracy in classrooms.

Green's (2002, 2008a) development of a classroom music pedagogy based on informal learning practices of popular musicians has had far-reaching impact upon the practices of music education in schools in England. The core aim of her approach, explained in detail in Green's most recent book (2008a) has been to document and explore the processes through which pupils learn when presented with an approach based on such informal popular music learning practices. Informal learning as the preferred pedagogic modality in music education was the basis of the Musical Futures Hertfordshire action research project. In it Green introduced pedagogy based on the common processes used by some popular musicians in their music making to classroom music lessons (see Green 2002, 2008a). Often referred to as an 'informal' pedagogy, it locates production and development of musical knowledge with pupils themselves. Among its features are that learners choose the music they learn themselves, it is learnt by listening and copying, rather than from notation, learning takes place in groups, with skills and knowledge acquired according to individual need and the musical areas of performing, composing, improvising and listening are integrated with the emphasis on creativity.<sup>2</sup>

Teachers' roles changed significantly in Green's approach. The first two or three lessons in the first project involved pupils making a cover version of a song they brought in as an audio recording, for which teachers were asked to: 'establish ground rules for behaviour, set the task going at each stage, and then stand back and observe what the pupils were doing' (Green, 2008a, p. 24). This element of Green's work has been taken out of context by some critics who have assumed that such was the role of teachers throughout, yet Green clearly specified that:

During this time teachers were asked to attempt to take on and empathize with pupils' perspectives and the goals that pupils set for themselves, then to begin to diagnose

pupils' needs in relation to those goals. After, and only after, this period, they were to offer suggestions and act as 'musical models' through demonstration, so as to help pupils reach the goals that they had set for themselves. (Green, 2008a, pp. 24–25)

This led to a new type of pedagogy which

involved teaching in a responsive, rather than directive way; metaphorically taking the learner by the hand, getting inside their head and asking 'What do they want to achieve now, this minute, and what is the main thing they need to achieve it?'. In this way, the teacher sits alongside the learner and is to a large extent a learner themselves. (Green, 2008a, p. 34)

Teachers are not intended to disappear from learning contexts but to operate as teacher-student, as advocated by critical pedagogues.

This approach may hold significant potential for the extension of openness and democracy in music classrooms but it also presents significant challenges to the development of teacher education. It may require very different qualities of music teachers entering the profession in the future. In the context of a recent discussion Green (2008b) emphasised the need of prospective music teachers to develop musical skills which will enable them to work intensely and effectively by employing informal music-making strategies, such as 'being able to aurally copy music from a recording of any kind of music the students brought in, as well as from the provided curriculum materials; being able to suggest how pupils can improve their instrumental skills, ensemble skills, compositional and improvisational skills; being able to link the informal strategies to the school's formal curriculum' (p. 6). Adding these comments to the issues raised by Green qua the qualities required of teachers to work effectively with her conception of informal pedagogy in music opens a rich field of research. Important questions are raised, which posit the need for further research into how non-traditional modes of musical practice might form an integral part of teacher education.

### **Informal learning and critical pedagogy**

Advocates of critical pedagogy have long sought to develop a model in which learning and teaching exist in a dialogic relationship. Based on notions of critical theory derived from the ideas of Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno (Pongratz, 2005), Marcuse (1991) and the work of those such as Freire (1970), Apple (2005), McLaren (2006), Giroux (1983a; 1983b; 1985; 1988a; 1988b; 1988c; 1997; Giroux and McLaren, 1994) and Habermas (1984), they acknowledge the value of students' lived experiences to their learning and advocate a commensurate change in the power balance in classrooms. Teachers are to be no longer the sole founts of knowledge in classrooms, their jobs are no longer to fill the empty vessels of their students' minds (following what Freire (1970) described as 'a banking model'). Instead, both teacher and students are to be regarded as having something to learn and something to teach. Using that knowledge as a conduit to new learning results in a change of perception for both students and their teachers (Abrahams, 2005).

We would argue that the work of Lucy Green (2008a) in the UK, which emphasised students' lived musical experiences as the foundation of their musical explorations and placed teacher and student in a new, more egalitarian and dialogic relationship to previous

modes of music education has much in common with the aims of critical pedagogy. We would further suggest that immersion in improvisation as a core element of music teacher education might do much to prepare teachers to work in such ways with students.

The data we present in the following section of this paper illustrate the ways in which free improvisation as a significant element of music teacher education might equip student teachers with the skills required to work in such ways in music education. The data also illustrates resonances between Green's identified characteristics of informal learning in music and the practice of improvisation. It is argued here that teachers who have been seriously concerned with the value of improvisation in music education might proceed to develop a teaching approach where deep involvement in improvisatory music-making further demolishes preconceptions according to which children are 'fed' with information and skills through a process that is cut off from musical creation and moves further towards dialogic respectful learning situations in music education.

### **Introducing the study**

A study was undertaken in two Greek universities (a University Music Department and a University Department of Early Childhood Education) with 91 student teachers during the period 2003–2007. During this period all the students were involved in a free improvisation course designed as part of their teacher education programme. As part of the assessment for the course, the students were required to produce reflective accounts/diaries recording thoughts, questions, impressions, feelings related to their participatory experience in the improvisations made in the class. It was also suggested that they record their possible perceptions of how this experience might influence their ways of thinking as future teachers. Recordings were made of work in progress and some students supplemented their written diaries with illustrations. The form of these journals/diaries was not dictated in advance; hence the data collected took various forms: diary-like regular entries, summative reflective prose, and in some cases cartoon-like representations and conceptual rivers. These different types of written accounts formed the data source drawn upon by the researchers to answer the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent can free improvisation be termed an informal music making practice?
- (2) What are students' perceptions of the nature and organisation of music making and creativity in this improvisatory setting?
- (3) To what extent did this improvisatory music-making facilitate openness and democratic musical practice?

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a narrative approach to tell the stories of the thoughts and feelings of two groups of student teachers as they experienced a course in improvisation. Narrative is becoming a widely adopted approach to the study of human action, and its value has recently begun to be acknowledged within the field of music education as well (Benedict, 2007; Georgii-Hemming, 2007; McCarthy, 2007). It is an interpretive paradigm used primarily in the social sciences and employs storytelling methodology. It is the story

that becomes the object of study, with the aim of understanding how individuals or groups of individuals understand events in their lives (Clandinin, 2007). Ethnographic techniques are used to gather data capturing the subject's story focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. Situated within a postmodernist stance, narrative approach emphasises that knowledge is socially constructed, value-laden, and based on multiple perspectives. Thus stories are taken as being constitutive of reality and as such as playing a crucial role in the researcher's understanding of the subject's construction of reality. This is not a kind of research that aims at the advancement of abstract theoretical knowledge, nor does it attempt to provide holistic accounts of 'how things are' within a particular setting. Rather, it retains a strong educative component, using a way of data gathering that is at the same time a means for enabling students to actively reflect on their learning experiences (see also Benedict, 2007). And as Maxine Greene has asserted we are currently becoming increasingly aware of the knowledge potential that inheres in the pursuing of narrative inquiry and also 'of the connection between narrative and the growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulatedness' (1995, p. 186).

The diaries were kept as a required assessment element while students were studying the module '*Improvisation in Music Education*'. One of the authors was the module leader. During this course, students were involved in free small and whole group improvisations, semi-structured improvisations, group improvisational composing based on a variety of ideas and stimuli (e.g. the work of John Paynter, 1992), reading and discussion of relevant literature, as well as in ongoing group discussions of the work developed and the issues that emerged.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes children also attended the sessions and improvised alongside the students. This was an attempt to begin working with small groups of young children within the protective environment of the university classroom; these formative experiences were becoming the basis of creating a link between the study of relevant music education literature and the personal experience of creating improvisations. This course did not aim at teaching models for applying improvisation in the classroom. It involved students in a process intended to develop their musical selves and to begin realising the importance of improvisation for their own relationship to music. Asking the students to keep diaries was aiming at creating a place for reflection, through which the students could be able to form and explore their own ideas about their relationship with improvisation and with its educational potential. For only through realising the importance of improvisation for the teacher's own music-making practices, could students be able to gradually apprehend the idea that children too might regard improvisation as a valuable musical process. In this context, our study of the students' accounts provides us the opportunity of developing another level of analysis, with the aim of clarifying the role of improvisation in teacher education. The decision to make a collaborative analysis, made by two researchers one of whom was also the course tutor, adds a further dimension to this effort. It denotes our wish to initiate a dialogue between the data, the insider's point of view and theoretical orientations, and a further critical 'eye', that of the first researcher, who acted as a critical friend in debating the conclusions drawn from the data and bringing contrasting theoretical perspectives to discussion of the data.

## **Data analysis**

In the course of thematic analysis (Van Manen, 1990) the researchers retained a descriptive-interpretive stance, which refrained from extensive coding procedures. An attempt was made to remain close to the data, providing extensive segments-examples that allow the reader to challenge interpretations, preferring 'direct interpretation and narrative description' rather than 'formal aggregation of categorical data' (Stake, 1995, p. 77). However, Wolcott (1995) argues that, 'while the effective story should be 'specific and circumstantial', its relevance in a broader context should also be apparent. The story must transcend its own modest origins: 'The case remains particular, its implications broad.' (p. 174). Against evidence-based research which 'limits the opportunities for educational professionals to exert their judgment about what is educationally desirable in particular situations' (Biesta, 2007, p. 20), this account offers critical observations and interpretations of a particular musical/educational experience. And this is offered as an invitation for dialogue about the 'oughts' of music education and the training of teachers, and not as measurable evidence that something 'works'. Our intention is to offer a research approach that 'can provide different understandings of educational reality and different ways of imagining a possible future' (Biesta, 2007, p. 21). In the light of this, when analysing the data we found a number of themes which fall under three main conceptual categories: 'Autonomy: in search of foundations', 'Developing the (musical) self' and 'Developing an open attitude towards children and music'. Each of these categories will be explained and elaborated upon in the sections that follow, illustrated by quotations from the students' diaries, musical examples and our reflections upon this material. Translations were made from the original Greek to English by the second researcher. Every attempt was made to preserve the original tone of the diary entries. Students' names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

## **Findings**

### *Autonomy: in search of foundations<sup>4</sup>*

[I felt] like a person who for the first time in his life tries to speak without a script, or like someone who has just begun to discover the power of difference, and tries to talk about this power, when up to that moment he believed in, or rather, was taught only how to judge better from worse, right from wrong, without being able to think about 'difference'. [Extract from diary of Vassilis]

In improvisation students began to experience the issue of how to judge difference without having to regress to ready made criteria. For some, this was the beginning of thinking about the power of difference. Initiation into hierarchical modes of thinking about music are seen not only as one-sided, but as leading to closure and exclusion dictated from above. Speaking 'without a script' leads students to assuming personal responsibility for developing their judgement. In terms of the role of improvisation as a means of transformative or liberatory education this could be termed the beginning of this student's development of critical

consciousness. But this is not an exercise in rational thinking:

The people in the group should be really present with their whole self and their whole interest in what is happening. What happens there should be really important to them, and each one of the players should believe in it. [Extract from diary of Kosmas]

Being present means entering in a distinctive realm of musical experience where rational thinking is suspended. At times this experience comes close to that of dreaming:

Sometimes when I close my eyes and relax I can stop my thinking and a moment comes when I begin to see images; it is as if I am dreaming but without being asleep. The moment I make the slightest thought, everything disappears; it is difficult to remain present . . . in free improvisation there is an element of fleetingness. As long as it lasts, you do not have, but you are. [Extract from diary of Kosmas]

Improvisation leads to the immersion in a form of musical experience that moves beyond the conception of musical knowledge as an object to be mastered. But it also posits the issue of the individual-group relationship in a direct way. Ideally, individuality and group identity are complementary:

That freedom [experienced in improvisation], is a feeling that isolates but at the same time incorporates one inside the group. You are in a bouquet of flowers, with your own aroma but at the same time you are part of a whole together with the rest equally distinctive flowers. [Extract from diary of Niki]

This sense of creating our own goals is crucial for the development of both individual and collective identity:

each of the players [should try] to get into the rhythm and style used by the rest of the group. In this way one will be able to follow the melody without being thoroughly absorbed by what one plays [. . .] but more with answering to the rest of the group and with participating in the dialogue creating one's own answers which, nevertheless fit to the whole melody, resulting in coherence and continuation of the whole thought of the group. [Extract from diary of Peter]

This 'whole thought of the group' cannot be dictated and cannot be given in advance. The creation of a heightened sense of presence is a collective enterprise that goes beyond individual rational control, for in free improvisation there is 'nothing' to coordinate the musical intentions of the participants. Joint creation of a common musical space where freedom is debated is a valuable educational pursuit:

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry has noted that to love the other does not mean to look into the eyes of the other; it means that both look towards the same direction . . . we need to be involved in processes which allow us to realise that we could find common points of (musical) reference, a common, however vague or obscure, goal. [Extract from diary of Georgia]

### *Developing the self*

One of the most persistent points which was raised by the students was the shortcomings of dominant formal music education training approaches to which they had been subjected.



That this was seen as a major obstacle in their development as teachers should be regarded as a source of hope.

I believe that we ourselves have deprived ourselves of the freedom of expression through music. I am terrified of the thought that one day a child will ask me: 'What is music?', 'How do people make music?', 'Can I not make music?' and I will have to give her an answer like this: 'I do not know, my dear child. I only take a book full of notes, put it in front of me, and play what's written on it'. No! I won't let this happen. [Extract from diary of Alkistis]

But for this to be achieved, student teachers themselves should be given the opportunity to explore how these questions can be given alternative answers. The experience of musical improvisation might be one way forward. But this does not happen automatically:

At the beginning I was systematically avoiding being involved, for I was unable to unlock myself [Extract from diary of Georgia]

This was a frequent comment read at or near the beginning of students' diaries, for the narrative pattern which described the relationship of improvisation with previous music education often looked like this:

As a child I used to sit at the piano and improvise. When I began taking lessons, I had great difficulties in reading the notes, so I was memorizing the pieces right after listening to them by the piano teacher, and then was pretending that I was reading them. [...] When the teacher discovered that I was cheating, he intensified his efforts to get me learn to read. And that was the end of improvisation for me. [Extract from diary of Alan]

Trying to unlock oneself was a continuous process that led to certain peak moments where individual participation in improvisation took the form of a revelation.

And the important thing is that when all this is happening there is no feeling of pressure, no anxiety about what you are doing, because at that moment you are so full that there is no space for anxiety. [Extract from diary of Kosmas]

The moment of improvisation is a moment of personal and collective responsibility. Yet this does not entail anxiety. Free improvisation might be a way of musical practice that relieves student teachers from the sense of intimidation experienced so often in skill-based competitive musical contexts. In this way it fosters the creation of an intimate relationship with music:

It is amazing how simple are the forms/thoughts that are needed in order to make music. I guess I always favoured simple ideas, but I had never imagined myself working with simple ideas without fear. [Extract from diary of Lisa]

Without fear. That is a theme that kept coming up again and again. And this says something about our ways of educating musicians: elitist, competitive, alienating music education contexts not only ensure 'excellence' but also instigate fear. The following comment is

characteristic of how the feeling of trusting one's own ideas is as real as it is unexpected:

And the funny thing is that I always wanted to have a xylophone or a metallophone in my hands. From then on, I was playing what I was thinking, and the strange thing is that I wanted to suggest improvements. That was very funny for me indeed! . . . I realised that music does not only mean songs or notes, but also things which you may not be aware that you know, and which now come out in a spontaneous and natural way. [Extract from diary of Natasha]

The process of finding one's personal voice within the improvisation practice often includes heated collaborative discussions about the group's practice. At the beginning discussions were difficult to initiate, for to many students to discuss meant to expose one's shortcomings:

[initially] I was terrified about the prospect of talking about our music. But I realised that not making judgments about abilities and talents, had a liberating effect in respect to my improvisations. [Extract from diary of Katerina]

And this might lead to a more self-confident relationship between musician and instrument. Not being afraid that one is always 'behind schedule' might be important for creating intimate relationships between self and sounds:

Now I feel much more ready to try and improvise using my own instrument, the flute. Now I love my little flute more, and every musical phrase written or one that comes from my mind fills me up. I always used to listen to a piece and imagine pictures, now I try to turn pictures into music. [Extract from diary of Estelle]

This student had reengaged with her instrument in a new and more fulfilling way. Her confidence in her own musicality was evidently raised.

#### *Developing an open attitude towards children and music*

Trying to find one's own personal voice within improvisational practice reveals to the student many of the obstacles and the preconceptions that conservatory education may have placed deep down in our thinking. Through involvement in improvisation these obstacles are gradually removed, opening the way for more open approaches to teaching.

How much harm has been done by the conservatory training. If you don't play the instrument in all kinds of unorthodox ways, how are you going to learn it, to discover it? Through improvisation the child learns the sounds, learns the joy of playing without following rules that are beyond it. Experiment, play, listen, and the forms emerge by themselves. You need only to listen and to be there. [Extract from diary of Lisa]

Notice the important issue that emerges out of the statement 'without following rules that are beyond it'. This is how the educational potential of improvisation is linked to the project of autonomy. Learning to set the rules through interaction and not through reference to some universal musical norm is what improvisation might offer to education and this is one way in which music education might be linked to emancipation. Learning with both children and adults would ideally result in a deep sense of respect for children-as-musicians. A sense that emerges out of the following statement where the student-teacher attributes an

exceptional sense of value to an improvisation he played with a six-year-old:

only a few times was I really present in the improvisation moment. One of those, maybe the one that really stands out, was when I played the metallophone with Katerina. In this improvisation I felt that I was really there with my whole attention and my whole interest in what was happening. [Extract from diary of Kosmas]

We see here emerging mutual respect between the student and teacher, one of the fundamental principles of critical pedagogy. Often the student-teachers-participants of this study documented their efforts to begin forging a personal pathway in their own teaching.

Finally I would like to say that I tried to get a little girl, whom I teach the piano, into the adventure of improvisation. Despite my lack of substantive experience, I think that this experience, the discussion we had with my pupil and the joy I felt right after this lesson is the most important outcome [of my involvement with improvisation during this university course]. [Extract from diary of Georgia]

Developing the improvisation ethic in the university may well be regarded as the spring-board for valuing the constituents of this improvisation ethic for music education itself:

For now I have learned that [. . .] even a little primary school child can create wonderful and very clever things when she is given the opportunity, and when you really engage with her. [Extract from diary of Jimmy]

So I became conscious that when you try to do something without having tons of rules in your mind about what should and should not be done, . . . and when you are given due respect as a human being and as a personality, you can create from the simplest to the most elaborate piece of music. [Extract from diary of Hannah]

Essentially through participation in improvisation one might be led to regard this practice as an ever-present mode of educational action. Learning to develop ways of musico-social relationships, learning to focus on the moment, on the unique qualities of each moment and of the participants, might be important not only in musical but also in interpersonal terms. This was observed by one student teacher as one of the most important things she had learnt from taking part in the module:

Learning to improvise on a variety of musical instruments, but most importantly, learning to improvise in [building] our relationship towards a child/student. [Extract from diary of Donna]

## **Discussion**

Green (2008a) suggests that there is a strong correlation between the pedagogy experienced in music education and student success and/or persistence in studying music. We suggest here that the three analytical categories identified as arising from our data: autonomy, developing the self and developing an open attitude towards children and their music, indicate three important areas in which involvement in free improvisation might contribute positively to the pedagogic preparation of teachers. Furthermore, the comments of the students whose journals we studied seem to indicate potential fruitful linkages between improvisation and the development of the qualities of empathy, mutual respect, willingness

to take risks and openness to new conceptions of music and musicking necessary for music teachers to be able to work with new approaches to music education such as Green's. The development of such qualities could moreover be crucial for such approaches to develop their potential to function as critical pedagogy, working towards musically and possibly even socially transformative practice.

Viewed as a core means of educating prospective teachers (both music specialists and particularly generalist teachers), 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. This belief rests on an apprehension of the improvisation process as an exemplary case of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way improvisation becomes a means for unsettling dominant conceptions of music learning and for engaging with informal learning practices. Improvisation not only offers a way of active engagement with music, but also is situated in a presentational epistemology, that is, in an epistemology that does not regard knowledge as 'an accurate representation of a pre-existing reality' (Biesta & Osberg, 2007, p. 16) but emphasises the situatedness of knowledge construction as a form of creative socio-cultural praxis. Following Lave and Wenger (1991), we suggest that learning through improvisation should be seen as a constituent feature of participation in communities of improvisation practice. This leads to a change of relationship between children and music, to a move away from music as a *given*, towards music as an *emergent*. It further contributes to a move away from apprehending learning as a cognitive process, towards regarding learning, thinking, and knowing, as 'relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51). Regarding learning as participation places emphasis on how children, through interaction, define their ways for making music, and assign particular meanings to their activities. Moreover, it goes far beyond knowledge as comprised of entities waiting to be internalised:

Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind. This means, among other things, that it is mediated by the differences of perspective among the co-participants . . . . Learning is, as it were, distributed among co-participants, not a one-person act. (Hanks, 1991, p. 15)

Two of the most important tenets of the situated learning approach are the acknowledgement of context as an essential aspect of learning and secondly, the value of implicit knowledge. 'The perceptions resulting from actions are a central feature in both learning and activity. How a person perceives activity may be determined by tools and their appropriated use. What they perceive, however, contributes to how they act and learn. Different activities produce different indexicalized representations not equivalent, universal ones. And, thus, the activity that led to those representations plays a central role in learning' (Brown *et al.*, 1989, p. 36). Moreover, many aspects of learning to act within a particular musical practice *need* to remain implicit. Talking specifically about conceptual representations and their development from the perspective of situated learning, Brown *et al.* (1989) argue that 'indexical representations gain their efficiency by leaving much of the context underrepresented or implicit' (p. 41).

Thus we propose that the issue of connecting informal learning and improvisation, might be resolved by regarding improvisation as an exemplary case of creating a

communicative context where most representations/conceptualisations/struggles to solve problems are left implicit. Through the perspective of situated cognition and the importance it gives to leaving things implicit, we could arrive at a solid conceptualisation of the value of improvisation as a mode of learning. Thus its value as a learning resource might be formulated in the following manner: creating a context where implicitness is deeply valued, recognised but *not* analytically pursued, leading to sustained engagement with the workings of musical structuring and communication from the 'inside': 'Authentic activity . . . is important for learners, because it is the only way they gain access to the standpoint that enables practitioners to act meaningfully and purposefully' (Brown *et al.*, 1989, p. 36).

Repeated engagement with improvisation and borrowing ideas by attending to other people's improvisations are the means by which improvisation generates its own future. All musical, structural and expressive problems are created and solved within it. The heuristic aspect of improvisation (Prévost, 1995) is, essentially, its driving force. Intensive and prolonged engagement of the participants of the present study with improvisation should be seen as a case of practising spontaneity, which is regarded as a vital source of knowledge of the workings of musical spontaneity and as a 'tool' for student teacher engagement in musical dialogues with their future students. Improvisation emerges as a mode of practice that redefines creativity, through rejecting its individualistic perception as a 'problem-solving' process that has dominated the concept of creativity through its appropriation by psychological research.<sup>5</sup>

Improvisation creates a musical context where inventiveness and responsiveness always get their meaning *in situ*, in the course of emerging ways of working together, and of drawing on different aspects of musical cultures and musical practices. The balance between inventiveness and responsiveness cannot be predefined, or pre-decided. Attending and listening closely to the generation of improvised music is constitutive of the meaning of the music-making process itself. It contributes to its transformation from an exploratory activity to a communicative one, from a private enterprise to a public event. It brings into the musical experience a vital ingredient: the exploration of the listener's response. Each improvisation had an *impact* upon the group, it made them think and feel, and the researcher's response has been an embodiment of this. Improvisation might be a powerful means in which to forge future teachers' identities through action and reflection that might help them be more open and responsive to their future students. Learning and accumulation of experience is the result of identifying important issues that pertain to music making which were then tackled and worked upon in subsequent improvisations.

Improvisation might be a way of placing musical imagination at the centre of the educational process, and to proceed to modes of musical practice that address issues of being and thinking together, thus becoming a form of socio-musical and thus political practice. It might be a way of going *beyond* Maxine Greene's (1995) thesis that 'the role of imagination is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected' (p. 28). To be able to go a step beyond this, is to be able to apprehend musical practice as a social locus for the development of distributed imaginative practice, and thus as an active mode of critique of the current state of affairs through imagining possibilities and actively searching for how to realise them musically. Improvisation permits students to become agents of musico-social action.

Through processes of sound organisation students are actively engaged in the construction of social relationships.

Thus musical creativity and musical creation might be regarded as analogous to the processes of social creation of autonomous forms of social organisation. There are strong links here with Castoriadis' (1991, 1997) notion of autonomy as a project of radical democracy: 'autonomy is the ability to call the given institution of society into question – and that institution itself must make you capable of calling it into question, primarily through education' (2007, p. 176). (Musical) autonomy should therefore be understood as the deliberate process of searching for and reflecting upon the rules of musical practice. Free musical improvisation is a musical context that allows the unlimited questioning of its very practice, thus becoming a way of pursuing the project of autonomy in musical terms.

Herein lies the political significance of free improvisation, which 'neither resides in the political commitment of improvisers, nor in their declarations of intent, but it is revealed through the aesthetics that their practice confers' (Saladin, 2009, p. 148). Saladin argues that its openness does not lead to an 'anything goes' stance but is a consequence of its '*lack of identity*' (Saladin, 2009, p. 148): 'This constituting lack is not a gap which should be bridged within free improvisation; on the contrary, this lack is the empty space which allows it to exist. This empty space manifests itself both in the absence of rules which would come to outline its contours and in the absence of a right required to practice it' (Saladin, 2009, p. 148). In this paper we have argued that this empty space provides a way for re-searching foundational aspects of what it means to create music, with important consequences for personal development and for building an open attitude towards children's musical potential. Such a musical practice creates a very particular mindset which, we argue, is especially valuable from an educational perspective. For it does not distinguish between levels of ability but between levels of commitment. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière (2004a, 2004b), Saladin argues that 'Free improvisation does not pre-exist, but is only a practice. So it cannot take count of the people coming into it, or to say this more explicitly in the terms of Jacques Rancière, it cannot mark out a clear and definitive boundary between those who can take part in it and those who cannot. This does not mean that it can be some sort of pure openness, but rather, that its empty space supposes an indefinite plurality' (Saladin, 2009, p. 148). Enabling prospective music teachers to pursue both through practice and reflection the question of how to create musical contexts that address these issues seems to be an invaluable and much-needed project.

## Notes

- 1 This is a fully coauthored article. Earlier drafts were presented at the *Training Music Teachers: Research in Psychology of Music and Music Education*, conference Università degli Studi di Padova – Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione (Padova, 5–6/11/2007), and at the *2nd Reflective Conservatoire conference*, Guildhall School of Music & Drama (London, 28–2/3–3 2009). We would like to thank the participants in those conferences for their many useful comments. We would also like to warmly thank the participants of this study, as well as the reviewers of the BJME for their constructive criticisms.

- 2 For detailed discussion of Green's work in the Musical Futures Hertfordshire Project see Green (2008a).
- 3 There has been a growing interest in the role of free improvisation and collaborative composition in higher education, as evidenced from a conference recently organised by the University of Surrey on 'Collaborative Processes in Music Making: Pedagogy and Practice' (see <http://www.palatine.ac.uk/events/view/1577/>) – for important documentation of such approaches, their rationale and theoretical justification, see Ford, 1995; Walduck, 2005).
- 4 As you will see in what follows the notion of autonomy as used here has a very different meaning from the way it is used by mainly liberal philosophers of education as an advancement towards independent rationality (e.g. Levinson, 1999; Reich, 2002) (for critiques of the liberal conception of autonomy as an exercise of rational thinking and free choice see Marshall, 1996; Lankshear, 1982; Fitzsimons, 2002; Devine & Irwin, 2006; Olssen, 2006).
- 5 For an analysis of the uses of the notion of creativity in education and a critique of the political neutrality of psychological versions of creativity, see Peters (2009).

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