

Research education shaped by musical sensibilities

Liora Bresler

College of Education, 1310 S. 6th Street, Champaign, IL 61820, USA

liora@illinois.edu

Based on my own research education courses for doctoral students, I examine the ways in which music provides powerful and rich models for perception, conceptualisation and engagement for both listeners and performers, to cultivate the processes and products of qualitative research in the social science in general, and in music education in particular. I discuss temporality and fluidity, listening and improvisation, originally terms associated with music, and their ramifications for qualitative inquiry. I then present some concrete examples from my research course, not as prescriptions to follow but as invitations for readers to generate their own activities and experiences.

Introduction

Research is a central component of doctoral programmes. The ability to do research is not only necessary to complete a doctoral degree and for being employed in a faculty position, but is now essential for tenure and promotion. Recognising the sophistication and the complexity of PhD/EdD degrees, doctoral students are heavily screened based on their ability to do well in traditional courses. However, the conduct of dissertation requires a major leap beyond that tested ability. The act of doing research in any field involves fresh perception, re-conceptualisation, a deepening of interpretation and understanding, and communication. A process that is rarely attended to in schools, it rests upon research educators to attend to its cultivation.

The focus on fresh perception and original interpretation necessitates new intellectual and affective competencies. In a doctoral programme students move from a relatively passive role of acquiring a defined body of knowledge and set of skills, to generating new knowledge, initiating projects and venturing beyond the boundaries of the safe and chartered. Accordingly, undertaking research requires not only traditional school intelligence but also openness to re-conceptualise, take risks and deal with complexity. Research education aims to cultivate a life-long commitment to continuously develop and expand. This process entails a strong intrinsic motivation in order to persist when the answer is not evident, to sustain a long and unpredictable research journey (in my experience, an inevitable part of research).

How do we, as research educators, approach the task of teaching research? Beyond providing rigorous, thought-provoking materials and readings, we have to facilitate experiences that promote these qualities and habits of mind. We also need to guide students in making new connections at different levels: connections between established theories

and their own empirical research; and connections between knowledge 'out there' (both existing theories and students' data) and their personal knowledge (beliefs, subjectivities, and 'folk theories' (Bruner, 1996). A third type of connection involves the communication between researchers and audiences. Given the public nature of research (unlike the self-contained nature of most courses), students need to situate their work in the bigger research literature and equally important, to address that world in communicating their research. This calls for a change of world-view: from satisfying their teachers' typically well-defined criteria, to meeting broader world-class criteria of research merit, moving beyond the class setting and the specific teacher to include the broader scholarly and practitioner communities with which we engage in public presentations and publications.

The teaching and learning of research, I suggest in this paper, calls for learning to perceive, listen and improvise, all of which are crucial to establish connection. Focusing on how these processes can be addressed in teaching research, I discuss the important and unexamined contributions that musicianship can offer to research education.

In their study of the impact of learning opportunities in the art curriculum on students' academic learning and general attitudes, Burton *et al.* (1999) found a variety of skills and dispositions associated with the arts. They conceptualised these competencies as habits of mind, the interweaving of intuitive, practical and logical modes of thought that characterise arts learning. My own discussion of research that is based on musicianship is conceptualised in the same spirit. Teaching research is not merely about transmission. It is also not about a simple transfer of musical skills to research. Rather, the focus is on the cultivation of affective, cognitive and embodied ways of doing and being prevalent in musicianship¹ in a qualitative research context.

The contributions of musical skills to research are not self-evident. Research in music education has traditionally followed the world-views, texts and tools of the social sciences. As have our colleagues in other scholarly disciplines, we in music education have typically privileged the numeral and the textual over the embodied and the textural (Bresler, 2006). That was true at the beginning of research in music education, in the first part of the 20th century, when the discipline parents were psychology and philosophy, and that seems equally true today, in the early 21st century, with the expansion of discipline parents to anthropology and sociology, among other disciplines. Even the emerging area of arts-based inquiry (e.g., Barone & Eisner, 2006; Cahnmann & Siegesmund, 2008; Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Knowles & Cole, 2007; Sullivan, 2005) is largely dominated by the visual arts, drama and literature.²

Based on my own research and teaching experience, this paper centres on qualitative research. The extensive literature on qualitative research methodology, traditionally originating in the disciplines of anthropology, sociology and education has expanded enormously our knowledge and understanding of inquiry. Still, there are areas at the core of qualitative research that are not addressed in this literature. They include (i) the temporal, polyphonic nature of scholarly engagement and meaning making, and (ii) the improvised and embodied dynamics and interactions between researchers and participants in the data generation stage. While the former may be inherent to all research, the second is prevalent in studying temporal lived experience on the personal and communal levels.

Examining the ways in which music provides rich and powerful models for perception, conceptualisation and engagement for both listeners and performers, I highlight their

potential to cultivate the processes and products of qualitative research in the social science in general, and in music education in particular. I discuss temporality and fluidity, listening, and improvisation, originally terms associated with music, and their ramifications for research methodology. I then present some concrete examples from my research course, not as prescriptions to follow but as invitations for readers to generate their own activities and experiences.

Qualitative research course: Context and background

Research education is one of my two teaching areas at the college of education. I have been teaching qualitative research methods for doctoral students at the University of Illinois since 1991.³ My students come from various disciplines – I have counted in my qualitative courses students from 17 different departments, including educational psychology, educational policy studies, library information science, psychology, social work, communication, kinesiology, art and music education.

My typical introductory qualitative course overviews fundamental assumptions of the post-modern paradigm, for example, assumptions about the inherent contextuality and multiplicity of *truth* in the social sciences; the inevitable *situatedness* of the researcher; and the necessity for new research *criteria* that these two basic assumptions generate. We discuss shared concerns of qualitative research with the more traditional positivist world-view (e.g. the concern with the applicability of findings) and the necessary different answers within these world-views (e.g. generalisability in quantitative versus transferability in qualitative), given the different assumptions of the two paradigms. We then discuss and practice the use of research methods appropriate to qualitative goals, focusing on in-depth observations and semi-structured interviews. Students are asked to do ‘mini exercises’ to practice those techniques in situations that are relevant to them.

We read what I consider exemplary works in the various genres of qualitative research – from ethnography and phenomenology to educational criticism and action research, discussing their respective goals, units of analysis and intellectual traditions. While the notion of listening, improvisation and empathic connection is largely absent from methodology textbooks and courses, it is implicitly addressed when writing about the process of research in biographical accounts of researchers. Writing about the processes of research is particularly prevalent in sociology and in anthropology (e.g. Balshem, 1993; Behar, 1996; Myerhoff, 1978; Nathan, 2005; Small, 1997; and Villenas, 1996) as well as in education (e.g. Barone, 2001; Peshkin, 1986). Examples in music education that address empathic research include Green (2002), Hebert (2005), Miller (1995), Powell (2006), Saether (2003), Silva (2007) and Silvey (2004), among others. Class readings also include some problematic research that exemplifies classic traps in each of these genres. Informed by these methodological aspects, students conduct their own research project throughout the semester. Learning through research is intensified by the communication to others – class members, myself and sometimes people outside the class, aiming for depth, clarity and engagement of audience.

While my qualitative courses aim to provide broad knowledge of the field and its research methods, it is students’ ability to connect – with ideas, with the phenomena they study, and with their own values and situated perspectives – that I regard as key to

becoming a researcher. Indeed, the most basic aspect of research (and curiously the one least addressed in textbooks), that facilitates and sets in motion everything else, is the process of getting connected – to an issue, to a setting, to a conceptual framework, to one's data. Connection motivates the development of all skills and interpretations. Connection enables an improvised way of attending in response to what is encountered, challenging researchers' pre-conceived notions of what is important in this setting, reconsidering what questions to probe in the face of emerging issues. It is a connection with the new understanding that prompts researchers to reach to an audience, much as the connections to the music one plays propel performance.⁴

Connections are clearly affective, as well as cognitive. Course materials, an eclectic mixture of classics and state-of-the-art readings, are selected for their potential to illuminate significant theoretical and practical issues, as well as for their communicative and emotive power. Students are asked to attend to data that are larger than the textual and include diverse textural forms of representation (e.g. body language, sound). The course requires that they independently acquire knowledge from nontextual sources, and develop the ability to perceive, interpret and evaluate complex ideas, interactions and patterns in a diversity of forms of human expression. These are the very abilities they will need as practicing researchers in the social sciences. Obviously connections are also embodied. Attending public music and dance performances together as course events for observation creates a shared, embodied experience, which allows us to discuss perceptions and interpretations from our individual and shared perspectives.

Teaching qualitative research clearly draws on a constructivist rather than a transmission model. The richness of the course is based on the expectation that each student brings to the project of research their life experiences, ways of making meaning, and what my colleague Buddy (Alan) Peshkin termed subjectivities (Peshkin, 1994). However, a constructivist world-view does not fully address the notion of connection that I regard as essential to research. The first part of this paper addresses the art of listening and improvisation essential to establish connections in research. The second part describes classroom activities that highlight the fluid, improvised nature of observations, interviews and thinking.

Conducting research within temporal and fluid reality: Lessons from music

The basic feature of sound, even before it becomes music, is its temporality and its inherent fluidity. All sensation takes place in time. Yet as the cultural historian, Walter Ong (1982) observed, no other sensory field totally resists stabilisation in quite the same way that sound does. Vision, for example, can register motion, but it can also register immobility. Indeed, Ong points out that it favours immobility, for to examine something closely by vision, we prefer to have it quiet. We often reduce motion to a series of still shots the better to see what motion is. However, there is no equivalent of a still shot for sound (Ong, 1982, p. 32). In the same spirit, the musicologist David Burrows noted that 'Where sight gives us physical entities, the heard world is phenomenally, relentlessly moving, ever changing' (Burrows, 1990: 111). Involvement in music as creators, performers, and attentive listeners requires that we engage skillfully and creatively in the evanescent aspects of world. These

are the very same sensibilities that are needed for qualitative researchers, investigating fluid, personal and communal, lived experience.

An important feature of sound is its association with an energy source, with the use of power. 'A hunter can see a buffalo, smell, taste, and touch a buffalo when the buffalo is completely inert, even dead, but if he hears a buffalo, he had better watch out – something is going on. In that sense, all sound, and especially oral utterance, which comes from inside living organisms, is 'dynamic'' (Ong, 1982: 32).

Temporality and science have had a long history of complex relationship.⁵ Whereas music seeks to revel in the time-based and the fleeting human experience and use them creatively, science, including the social sciences, traditionally sought to overcome them. In the model of studying anything, say, a buffalo, or a butterfly, science, in pursuing its goal of achieving certain knowledge, often captures it, kills it, dissects it, models it, and classifies it, to produce a certain sort of understanding of the butterfly. This understanding is valuable. However, it is an understanding of a dead organism, not a living one. An understanding of a dead buffalo, or butterfly may help us understand a living one, but considerably different effort of mind is needed to understand the living butterfly. Indeed, in ecological studies, the intent has shifted diametrically to living organisms in eco-systems. When biologists and ecologists study the world, they are interested in seeing the dynamics of life in all of its interactivity. The real interest is increasingly in function and the real focus is on observing its subtle, yet far-reaching interactions with its eco-sphere. The understanding of living personal and social experience that we aspire to in qualitative research requires responsive, improvised procedures, based on the recognition of interactions and the dynamic nature of what we study.

The nature of connections in research: Juxtaposing detachment with empathy

Discussion of connection needs to examine the notion of objectivity and what is often regarded as its close kin, *detachment*. Objectivity has been constructed as incompatible with subjectivity: objectivity seen as a valuable goal in positivism, and misguided if not impossible in post-positivism (the reverse, of course, is equally true: subjectivity was the enemy in positivism and a basic axiom in post-positivism). In the first decade of the 21st century, we have established the inevitability of subjectivity in the social sciences (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Peshkin, 1994.) With an increasing number of qualitative studies published, we increasingly encounter the dangers of enmeshment, the lack of detachment, between the researcher and what they study.

Martin Buber's conceptualisations of relationship, I suggest, provide useful lenses to think of relationships between researchers and what they study, with caution to both positivist and post-positivist world-views. Buber distinguishes between different types of interactions between people and things; in this paper, I focus on people and what they study. 'It-It' people, according to Buber, 'are apt to be great scholars of extraordinary erudition, with no time to have a self ... It is a subject one has chosen to study, and there may be others working on the same subject, and one respects them insofar as they, too, have no selves and are objective' (Kaufmann, 1971: 12). A relationship within positivism is typically presented as an 'It-It', maintaining that objective, distanced stance. On the other end of

the spectrum, an 'I-I' relationship implies a complete identification of research with the studied, with no space between the researcher and what is studied. In contrast, Buber's concept of 'I-Thou' involves a relationship of dialogue between the self and what is studied. A dialogue, I suggest in this section, involves acknowledgement of the distance between the researcher and the researched, a detachment that is connected and relational rather than aloof, and that often touch and affect the self (Bresler, 2008).

Detachment is often regarded as the enemy of connection. Instead, I suggest here that it is complementary. In the Enlightenment quest to reduce dogma and prejudice in intellectual arenas, Rene Descartes imported the Galilean concept of detachment from physics into the discipline of philosophy. With the rejection of the model of the physical sciences for the social sciences came a rejection of detachment. Clearly, for people interpreting themselves and the world around them with detachment, the best view of anything would be a spectator's distanced view (Spinoza *et al.*, 1997). Detachment, Spinoza *et al.* suggest, enables us to obtain a wider view, by extracting ourselves from the immediate pressures of the moment, and to see what is before us in terms of its relationship to other matters. 'To understand what is happening, say, in a bustling port or on a battlefield, a port supervisor or a general who seeks detachment would find high ground from which to view operations below in their interrelations as a whole. Detachment enables us to extract ourselves from the passions of the moment so that we can be objective, that is, think and speak out of the composed mood that characterizes both our normal life and those moments when we feel ourselves to be thinking most clearly' (Spinoza *et al.*, 1997: 6–7). These examples exemplify two aspects of detachment – detachment *from* passion and detachment in order *to* see all the relevant interconnections (*ibid.*). A detachment *from* facilitates detachment *to*.

These two aspects combine to form a third type, which is interestingly associated with the practice of anthropologists and artists: detachment from habitual and practical forms of seeing (in the spirit of the second half of the famous anthropological adage, to 'make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange'). The familiar-to-strange process requires that we go beyond decoding and recognition towards heightened perception. A fourth form of detachment, the epitome of scientific thinking, involves noting only the features of the things that most clearly serve the instrumental purpose at hand towards the creation of theory (Spinoza *et al.*, 1997). Theory is an intensified form of detachment, an abstraction where we isolate the features of things that we uncover in our instrumental investigation and investigate how the elements are interconnected. As modern science shows, such a theoretical approach – reducing phenomena to the relations of context-free elements – can produce great insight and power when it comes to understanding the physical world (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spinoza *et al.*, 1997).⁶ This form of detachment has not been part of the artistic quest, where particularity is central.

Detachment in research has come under fierce attack by post-modernist views. Max Weber's quotation made famous by Clifford Geertz (1973: 5), that 'man is an animal suspended by webs of significance he himself has spun', conveys the impossibility of objectivity and points out the inherent connection of people with the culture they study. Indeed, *empathic understanding* (cf. von Wright, 1971; van Manen, 1990; Kvale, 1996) came to distinguish the aims and processes of human sciences from other forms of research. Initially voiced within phenomenology, an intensified form of connection, the goal of empathic understanding quickly spread into other qualitative genres

(Bresler, 1995/2006). Within a Cartesian research culture that has traditionally highlighted objectivity and distance, empathic connection, putting oneself in another's place, signifies a major conceptual shift. Traditionally, social science tabooed connection to the so-called 'subjects', for fear of emotional entanglement. Avoiding connection was relatively easy to follow in the field of laboratory psychology given its setting and structures. However, it was harder to maintain in disciplines that required prolonged engagement in social settings and extensive interaction with research participants. Indeed, anthropology was a pioneer in taking a more reflective stance to research, incorporating critical examination of their presence and actions, reflecting on the ways that self and others have been mutually shaped in the process of fieldwork. In this process, the dialogical, recursive nature of fieldwork and what it meant for the findings of research became an important methodological issue.

Rather than an 'either-or' detachment or connection, I argue that the challenge of qualitative research is trying to understand the other empathically, while maintaining detachment from habitual forms of seeing and the necessary distance of disciplined scholarship. Here, I find it useful to distinguish between an attachment and a connection, the former entailing passion to an *outcome* whereas the latter entails passion for the *process* of inquiry (involving a certain amount of equanimity about the result). A juxtaposition of engaged empathy within distance can be observed in the notion of aesthetic distance (Bullough, 1953/1912).

Indeed, artistic experiences offer important models for a connection within an analytic state. In his book *Move Closer: An Intimate Philosophy of Art*, John Armstrong (2000) identifies five aspects of the process of perceptual contemplation of an artwork that I believe, exemplify this relationship: (1) noticing detail, (2) seeing relations between parts, (3) seizing the whole as the whole, (4) the lingering caress and (5) mutual absorption. Although these specific terms were generated in the area of visual art and in the discipline of appreciation, these aspects operate when embarking on the performance of a new musical piece in the process of making sense and coming to know it.⁷

As my own musical practice has shown, a connection to music in a performance (or in preparation for one) keeps emotions as tools of expression within an aesthetic distance, rather than drawing on them as self-expression, a point made powerfully by Suzanne Langer (1957). Getting acquainted with a musical piece involves becoming aware of detail which our habitual and rapid seeing and hearing tend to gloss over. This process requires a conscious effort: we are literally turning our attention to different parts of the musical (or visual) work. Armstrong's second aspect, that of noting relations, involves apprehending how every element performs with respect to the whole piece. The third aspect of completeness and coherence, the grasping of unity in the face of multiplicity, is central to performing anything but particularly larger musical (as well as theatrical, dance and visual) forms.⁸ This examination of relationships towards a deepened perception is best conducted from a spectator's distanced view.

The fourth and fifth aspects of experiencing art, what Armstrong has termed the lingering caress and mutual absorption, involve a new set of relationships between the viewer and the artwork. The structured perceptions established through the analytic lenses open to include personal connections. Lingering caress is characterised by the lack of instrumental purpose – a form of engagement which is traditionally associated with the concept of aesthetics, indeed, lack of a specific goal. When we linger, Armstrong (2000)

notes 'Nothing gets achieved, nothing gets finished – on the contrary, satisfaction is taken in spinning out our engagement with the object' (p. 98).⁹ This process of a deepening relationship allows for artistic and aesthetic discoveries and facilitates 'taking in'. The fifth aspect, mutual absorption, refers to the personal transformative character of deep engagement. Armstrong writes, 'When we keep our attention fixed upon an object which attracts us, two things tend to happen: we get absorbed in the object and the object gets absorbed into us' (p. 99).

From a musical perspective, I have added to Armstrong's five aspects a sixth aspect – that of performance, communication to an outside audience (Bresler, 2006). Music can unify performers and listeners in a shared experience, in a similar way that a presentation (research or otherwise) can. The process of communication can, in my experience, intensify the other five aspects.

These six aspects of engagement with the arts – interactive and cyclical, rather than hierarchical and linear (hence the use of the term 'aspects' rather than 'stages') are central to the conduct of research. These aspects infuse the various stages of research, including the processes of interviewing, analysis and writing. The first three aspects are analytic and task-oriented, as we focus on detail, note relations and patterns, and grasp for a coherent whole (examples of these processes during data collection and analysis can be found in methodological texts, see, for example, Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 2002; and van Manen, 1990). Noting and perceiving, searching for themes and motifs, sensing the various voices, and their contributions to the whole, all are prerequisite to, and in turn intensified by a connection. That process can expand one's emotional as well as cognitive repertoire. The lingering involved in prolonged engagement and immersion in both fieldwork and data analysis allows us, in the words of Armstrong's book title, to 'move closer' in order to establish intellectual and emotional connection and gain a renewed perception and interpretation of the other. In this dialogical space for the creation of meanings (a space which becomes tri-directional in the process of communication) ideas and issues are appreciated, absorbed and internalised.

Connection is essential to all the arts, but achieved differently in each. Because music is not mimetic, connection is not based on a 'story' (as in literature and drama) but on a mood, an emotional quality without a specific plot. Our training as musicians, I argue, embodies that complex, seemingly oxymoronic habit of mind juxtaposition of empathic connection within an aesthetic distance.

Mutual absorption involves the deconstruction of the inside/outside dichotomy. John Dewey has pointed out the falsity and futility of this dichotomy, pointing to the interactive nature of making and experiencing art (Dewey, 1934), as well as more broadly, in all learning experiences (Dewey, 1938). Within a musical context, Wayne Bowman (1998), Tia DeNora (2000), and Bennett Reimer (2003) capture the porous process involved in listening to music, blurring the boundary between body and mind in the making of musical decisions. Connection is facilitated by intense listening and generates improvisational interactions.

A connection through hearing

The most important quality in establishing connection in research is the ability to attend in a fresh and open way,¹⁰ beyond the literal and the explicit. When African healer Sorko Senyi

tried to teach the anthropologist Paul Stoller (with a great amount of difficulty and some frustration, as Stoller reports) about the ways of his tribe, he cautioned Stoller: 'Without sight or touch, one can learn a great deal. But you must learn how to *hear*, or you will not learn about our ways' (Stoller, 1984: 560). Sorko Senyi's message was that hearing is essential in order to understand key cultural values. But what does it take to be able to hear? How do we cultivate a good ear?

Philosopher of music education, Bennett Reimer provides some useful suggestions about a good ear:

an ear trained to hear exquisitely subtle nuances of sound with exquisite accuracy, so the subtlety can be captured accurately in the music being created. It requires an ear steeped in the historical, cultural, musical expectation system that this instance of creativity resides within, so that the meanings being created are part of an artistic tradition and also an original contribution. An ear aware of the social surround in which the creative act exists, and able to incorporate . . . ideas and beliefs relevant to this particular creative act, 'musicalizing' them as only music can do. An ear that hears with imagination: that hears possibilities and potentials, reveals new and fresh solutions, takes the act toward an emergence of meaning not yet achieved. (Reimer, 2003: 119)

Reimer brings up the notion of a creative listening characterised by an intense quest for understanding and openness. He points to the centrality of contexts and the complex aspects of the aesthetic encounter where openness is crucial:

In preparing themselves for the creative reconstruction listeners put themselves in a state of grace, or openness to musical meaning . . . Listeners are called on to make sense of the music, to 'put it together' with mind, body, and feelings. Each individual listener must bring to that task his or her technical capacities to hear the complexities of the music, a 'peculiarly musical aesthetic searching' for musical meaning, and a spirit of openness to inner growth as a result of doing so. (Reimer, 2003: 117)

These are the same qualities required for listening in qualitative research: the interaction with the studied phenomenon; becoming acquainted with the multiple contexts of our setting. In research, too, listening attends to both affective and cognitive, requiring that we draw on them both. The contents of interviews, like musical contents, are complex and nuanced in their expression, inseparable from affective moods. Equally important is the listening required in observations, listening for texture, for layers of meaning, for subtle dynamics, for dissonance and consonance. Analysis of data, too, requires listening to layered meanings and nuances. Listening and hearing, as Sorko Senyi and Reimer claim, go beyond the explicit text, the literal, factual content. It attends to tone and mood, to form and rhythm, to the tangible and the intangible.

The level of complexity involved in hearing that aims to connect, whether in music or in research, counteracts popular views of hearing as passive. Engaged listening, in spite of its deceptively non-active appearance, can be quite powerful. Musical listening is disciplined and requires training and experience. Indeed, musicians are well-aware of the disciplined, hard work invested in getting connected, for example, when we learn a musical piece.

A fundamental function of listening involves providing a receptive, open space (or its auditory equivalence, silence) for the other to present itself. Silence, as folklore researcher

and storyteller Betsy Hearne has observed, is not a vacuum to fill, but 'a presence to respect' (Hearne, 2005). Silence is a rich place that facilitates creation. The act of communication brings the story to life in response to, or rather, as Hearne insightfully points out, in partnership with, listeners.

An essential component of connective listening is trust. For the participants, trust means that they will be heard with respect, that differences of opinions will not be ridiculed or dismissed. For the researcher, it is trust that they can learn something meaningful from the participant. It is not a blind trust, but one that is open to critical reflection. Trust in the educational power of the conversation requires a certain amount of 'selflessness', giving up the existing boundaries of the ego, at least for the duration of the encounter. It also involves the willingness and the ability to imagine what it means to be the other.

Improvisation in listening, observations and data analysis

Listening entails a responsive attitude, leading to an improvisational rather than a scripted interaction. Improvisation is an umbrella term, with a range of meanings, from the local ornament of a Baroque suite to the creation of music in the course of performance. In his discussion of the different types of musical activities and roles, Bennett Reimer notes:

In improvisation the performer makes substantive decisions about what the musical sounds might be and become in the very act of performing them. The combination of original generation of musical ideas, and the simultaneity of doing so within the act of playing or singing, separates improvisation from both composition and the performance of composed music. Composers aim for a relatively determinate work awaiting completion through performance. In contrast, improvisers realize the creation of the work in the very act of performing it. Each improvised performance, even of the same piece, is expected to be different from every other performance of that piece, despite the use of a well-known repertoire of sonic gestures. Within well-established repertoire of choice making, the improviser, every time, attempts a distinctive exploration. (Reimer, 2003: 115)

Improvisation then is not about complete freedom but is rather based on pre-existing structures that guide an improvisational performance (Nettl, 1974; Becker, 2000). Jazz musicians rely on a priori created *licks* – 'short melodic lines that can be used at many different points during a solo and that are worked out and refined in the privacy of rehearsal' (Sawyer, 2003: 180). A musician's personally developed repertoire of licks contributes to a recognisable style. The tension between using licks and playing novel phrases reflects a broader tension between creating something new, yet staying within the tradition of the genre of jazz (Sawyer, 2003). Clearly, discipline and systematic practice are not antithetical but are necessary to improvisation. Improvisation in itself, whether in music or in life, does not guarantee quality. Some improvisations are fresh and inspired. Others are repetitive and boring. Good improvisations reflect skills, imagination and connection among the performers away from an 'automatic pilot' mode. Improvisation demands a lack of attachment to a script, allowing for an open space where the unplanned can be incorporated. This requires drawing on intuition and imagination during the act of performance, with a connectedness to the music as well as to other musicians. The trust

and respect involved in the egalitarian ethics of improvisation (Becker, 2000) generate what Sawyer terms *collaborative emergence* (Sawyer, 2003).

Improvisation has been associated with indigenous music of various cultures and with jazz. It took a post-colonial world-view to recognise the sophisticated skills, richness and knowledge of these various types of music. Just as improvisation has been marginalised in Western classical music, a tradition that is typically associated with predictability (Nettl, 1998) and canonical traditions (Nettl, 1995), improvisation in research has not been addressed. Academic research, like western 'serious' music, highlights sophisticated skills and technical and theoretical knowledge, distinguishing research from 'folk theories' much as classical music is distinguished from folk music.¹¹

A research methodology that aims at empathic understanding demands that we respond to the others' actual (and therefore unfolding) presence, that is, that we *improvise* beyond established scripts and procedures. Improvisation is particularly vital to research conducted in naturalistic settings, because it treats the unexpected as engendering opportunity to learn about the setting and the participants, whom we seek to understand and represent.

The inherent quality of improvisation in qualitative interviews and observations is acknowledged by the terms 'open-ended' and 'semi-structured', indicating a distinct style of interacting with participants, and, more broadly, with new perspectives and experiences (in contrast to pre-ordained ones). Improvisation is often seen as a musical genre with particular skills but on a more fundamental level, it is an attitude, a relationship.¹² Indeed, open-ended interviews draw on fundamentally different sets of skills and sensitivities from formal interviews. Attending to the currents of the conversation with participants, and the ability to identify themes and issues beyond the listener's preconceived concepts takes both intense concentration and flexibility.

Improvisation is present in data generation (e.g. probing, generating new questions) and in data analysis (e.g. in conceptualising new categories and in themes). An improvisationistic style during field-based interviews and observation can also shape research design. Improvisations in my own work meant that research settings expanded in response to emerging puzzlements as well as opportunities to include, for example, teachers' private and semi-private artistic contexts (Bresler, 1991) as well as participants' homes (Bresler, 1997).¹³ These new settings provided richer understanding of participants, in their activities, customs and cherishing.

The centrality of improvisation is evident in anthropological studies that portray the processes of research. Dating back to the unexpected, improvised research design of Malinowski's (1922) ground-breaking work¹⁴ that changed the vision of what ethnographies can and should be, improvisation has been addressed as part of methodological accounts in anthropology, for example, in the compelling works of Balslem (1993), Behar (1996) and Myerhoff (1978). An explicit reference to improvisation in educational research has been raised by Penny Oldfather and Jane West (1994: 22) in 'a playful attempt to employ a metaphor of qualitative research as jazz', in order to understand some fundamental qualities of qualitative research. As jazz is guided by a deep structure of chord progressions and themes, qualitative inquiry, Oldfather and West argue, is guided by epistemological principles, socially constructed values, inquiry focuses, and findings emerging through analytic methodologies such as constant comparison. The jazz metaphor, they suggest,

creates a pathway for making explicit the tacit understandings that enable us to make our way as researchers without fully orchestrated scores.

One particular area involving improvisation is in collaborative, team research. In a paper based on an in-depth examination of one research project (Bresler *et al.*, 1996), the researchers described the improvisatory processes involved in a research study on arts and music education. Characteristic of a small ensemble (rather than an orchestra or a large choir), teamwork consisted of individual, interdependent voices, each with its own timbres and characteristics, yet all interacting to create a whole. The intensity of conversations, the conflicts and their resolutions (resolutions interpreted as acknowledgment of others' points of view, rather than agreements) were experienced by the group members as embodying aesthetic quality. That quality emerged as a part of a focused, attentive listening and sharing, integrating a variety of perspectives, yet targeted toward common goals and endeavours. Research courses can foster these types of collaboration by structuring small group discussion to highlight the differences of perspectives that result from different interpretations of the same observed event, as well as the diversity of perceptions attributed to the individuals' lens and frame of reference.

Given its fluid, unpredictable nature, improvised activities (which cannot be pinned down in the same way that fully scripted ones can) do not typically command the reverence traditionally allotted to scripted works of art. Here, reverence is countered by meaningfulness. Life, lived creatively and meaningfully, requires improvisation, distinguishing a life lived from a life endured.

Qualitative research involves the seeming oxymoron of hard work and sophisticated skills, and the playful spontaneous, responsive frame of mind that accommodates disciplined improvisation. Disciplined improvisation involves an interplay between script and exploration, tradition and innovation. Obviously, improvisation is harder for students who typically lack research experience and possess less developed research skills. Still, the habit of mind of improvisation and its contributions as enhancing methodological options can be attended to and cultivated or ignored and quenched.

Research education: Tales from the field

A course can be viewed as an *occasion* rather than as a tool:¹⁵ in the case of research courses, an occasion for the student to engage in cultivating skills and the activities of meaning making and interpretation. Beyond the explicit contents, teaching imparts implicit messages, cultivating habits of mind. In teaching qualitative courses, the habit of mind is one that juxtaposes a critical detachment with listening towards empathic connection. The habits of attentive, nuanced hearing and improvisation can be facilitated through experiences as well as through theories and skills.

Klemp *et al.* (2008) suggest that learning was adapted in modern America as a term for what persons only *sometimes* do – with a narrow range of materials in a narrow range of contexts. For Dewey, and for the jazz community, note Klemp *et al.*, learning is ubiquitous and continual. This would be a non-controversial position if learning were not taken, and mistaken, to be a thing – an entity, and a measurable one – rather than something people must do constantly in the course of getting their lives to 'sum up and carry forward' (*ibid.*). Sharing this belief about the ubiquity of learning, I integrate research

experiences as well as daily life experience with classroom discussions that aim to facilitate and intensify students' explorations. To that effect, I provide students with cumulative occasions, structured to produce dissonance and consonance (for example, leading a class discussion in the first session of class, with its heightened sense of expectations and tension, centring on the perceptions and lived experiences of students, inviting students' personal constructions within the shared public space of the class: or examining the small dissonances of daily life generated by diverse cultural backgrounds, in my own case, for example, manifested in different types of eye contact, body language, and discursive styles). Mobilising affect and cognition can maximise students' intellectual and emotional investment. The actual teaching, orchestrated and structured throughout the semester, strives to form 'an experience' (Dewey, 1934). The operational day-to-day curriculum of the course, while based on the pre-planned *ideal* and *formal* curricula of goals and texts (Goodlad & associate, 1979) aspires to support a vibrant interactive encounter with students. In this process, I expect students to explore and traverse their own intellectual and emotional landscapes, the research conducted 'outside' in the world, as well as the search and research conducted 'inside', within their self. It is this sense of participation, at the heart of music-making, of research, and of all effective learning, a participation that is at the basis of reading, reviewing and interacting with others' research, that I hope to cultivate in myself and in my students in conducting their own research.

Cultivating perception and improvisation through nuanced listening

In this section I briefly discuss a couple of activities that I use to facilitate students' connection. The first, most important task, in my opinion, is encouraging students to form an intensified relationship with what they study, getting beyond their habitual rapid ways of seeing and hearing, in the same way that they will do with their own research projects (as well as with scholarly texts, theories and others' research). For an early assignment, I choose an object with well-defined, small-scale boundaries. I also choose one that, at least in a technical sense, is stable, that is, a visual object. Because I aim for objects that allow rich interpretation, I send students to the Art Museum asking them to choose two artworks: one that they find appealing, that is, that they connect with easily, another one that they do not. I ask them to spend at least 30–60 minutes with each artwork. This, I explain, is not an assignment to prove their knowledge in art history, but is rather an assignment about perceiving; observing, describing in detail and interpreting in a fresh way. Perception and description lead to the more abstract activities of deepened interpretation, generating themes and issues. Students identify their curiosities and come up with queries and directions to further their understanding and knowledge.¹⁶

Aiming to cultivate a space for inquiry, I ask students to generate a list of questions addressed to various people situated differently in relation to the artwork; for example, the artist; the person who first bought it; the curator in the museum; another museum visitor who seems to be situated 'differently' (e.g. ethnicity, age, gender). To expand their horizons beyond the specific case, here, the artwork, and to cultivate the type of creative listening to the social surround suggested by Sorko Senyi and Bennett Reimer, I ask students to identify relevant contextual information: What else would they need to know to better understand and relate with the artwork? Where will they search for this information? Useful contexts

for the artwork range from general history and art history to local community contexts and museology.

In observing their unfolding engagement with the artwork and aiming to cultivate appreciation for prolonged engagement, I ask students to record how long they stayed with each artwork, and how the first 10 minutes were different from the last 10 minutes. I am often amazed by the commitment, concentration and depth of insights that students bring to the assignment. Most people stay way beyond the minimum of 30 minutes, sometimes up to 3 hours. The journey conducted with the less appealing artwork can be illuminating about how we form relationships with the phenomena that trigger negative emotions, which do not correspond to our own values, and invite us to expand our current perspectives. Dealing with the difficult is inevitable in the conduct of qualitative research. How does a sustained engagement, an (admittedly enforced) lingering caress affect these perspectives? Does this engagement lead indeed to a change? If so, what sort of change? Noting hindrances to a connected relationship as well as to what facilitate it expands awareness.

The next assignment approximates more closely real-life encounters and takes the skills of perception and interpretation a step further in attending to a temporal event. I often choose our university Krannert Performing Center as the bounded system for its well-attended rich performances of classical and indigenous genres which draw various types of audiences. Other research settings include coffee houses, galleries and various communal gatherings. Here, too, I ask students to take descriptive and interpretive notes, expanding their senses to include what they hear, see, touch and smell (Rasmussen, 1999). I ask them to generate a list of contexts that provide relevant knowledge: from community and university contexts to stylistic, artistic, historical and geographic contexts. As in the museum assignment, students generate questions directed to various people and sources of knowledge, including a set of interview questions to another audience member with a different background, aiming for diversity of perspective. These questions serve as a basis to conduct an actual interview with a class member who attended the same setting. The diversity of student population in departmental affiliation and the large number of international students in the class provide a variety of perspectives where we examine the social aspects of interpretation and understanding. In preparation for their interviews, I model a 'mock interview' with a couple of student volunteers in front of the class. As class members observe these interviews, they typically comment on the embodied relationship between interviewer and interviewee as reflecting and shaping the evolution of connection. Comments also address the improvised questions, the qualities of hearing, and the differences between those interviews and TV interviews in goals and style.

For their own semi-structured and open-ended interviews, I ask students to examine how the actual, live interviews were different from the planned ('licks') and to note the improvised parts that emerged in response to the unfolding interactions. I ask them to assess whether improvisation yielded new directions and insights or not. We use both observations and interviews for a shared data analysis conducted in class where different perspectives create a textural, multi-layered text.

A research endeavour requires methodological awareness for the cultivation of empathy within distance and the use of improvisation. Specifically I ask students to reflect on their assumptions regarding the nature of the realities of the examined event (sometimes addressing 'objective reality', for example, location and time of performance;

sometimes 'perceived reality' depending on where students are situated in relation to the event physically, in terms of their musical background, etc.; sometimes the ethnographic 'constructed realities' that focus on shared social and cultural values interpreting behaviour and etiquette; sometimes the private phenomenological 'created realities' involving individual, personal experience). Students reflect on the extent to which they have been attentive and receptive to multiple perspectives, particularly those different from their own, and what that multiplicity meant for their understanding of the event.

Given the centrality of the 'researcher instrument' I ask them to examine what values and lenses did they bring to their observations? What surprised them in listening to others? Were they changed in any way by the encounter? I ask them to identify emotions that are triggered in the interaction and note any shifts of understandings, cognitive and affective. I ask them to observe when they approach the event as a connoisseur, that is, as an expert, and when they adopt an anthropological stance of an uninformed but interested outsider, with its open space to see freshly. I ask them to note empathic relationship with their interviewees as well as hindrances to empathy. In this journey of research, students keep on-going logs where they note their evolving interactions and reflections.

The methodology paper includes reflections on design, methods and trustworthy criteria. Examining the use of improvisation, students note a priori frameworks and structures versus those parts that are improvised. They reflect on the extent to which the study is naturalistic, versus the extent to which interventionist methods are used in the study (interviews, for example, are always interventionist). They discuss issues of sampling, including pre-designed or improvisational, the choice of informants. They reflect on what they ended up sampling and what they did *not* sample. They examine emerging issues and contexts: Which contexts were *initially* useful for the conduct of the study? Which contexts emerged as being useful once the study was under way? Which contexts were only minimally or not at all useful? In the quest to trace emergent directions, I ask students to keep a 'weekly title' for their observations and provide a list of these titles for their field notes illustrating the evolution of their thinking.

The awareness of improvisation, or of hindrances to improvisation, is an important part of the activity. Improvised processes and mindsets result in emergent versus pre-determined issues and the inclusion of emic versus etic points of view. I ask students to present examples for each of these categories. Collaborative teams prove to be useful for the examination of students' perspectives.

At different stages of the study we pause to ask: What did we learn from doing this observation? From the interviews? From the interim report summarising findings half way through data collection? I prompt them to note surprises, to indicate an unexpected encounter, possibly a tension, an expansion. In the process of refining research skills and sensitivities, I ask them what aspects of the research activity were most difficult? Most frustrating? What did they learn from this methodologically? What else do they need to learn to improve perceptions and skills?

Coda: The underlying musical sensibilities of both teaching and research

The process of teaching, like that of research, is inherently improvisational and takes careful listening. The power and appeal in both teaching and research are in their

open-ended quality, in the quest to 'tune' to that situation and to the specific participants. These connections, I believe, are similar to those in aesthetic encounters, reflected, for example, in the five aspects noted by Armstrong.

I find it interesting that the underlying similarity between research and teaching is not discussed in academia. People often think of research and teaching as competing for one's resources and on a technical level, they certainly do. On a deeper level, I find they support each other in the attitudes they promote for fresh perception and communication. Specifically, the actual process of teaching research methods (which includes communicating my own research experiences) has refined and extended my own understandings and skills of research. The processes of teaching and advising facilitate intensified reflection on my part. As I have often shared in class, it is much easier to be smart on others' people work and thinking. I find myself making an observation or suggestion on students' work, followed by a realisation that this idea will actually apply to my own research. The community of learning involved in teaching research courses is as rewarding to me as a teacher as I hope it is for the students, reminiscent of those relationships in a performance.

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Notes

- 1 Some of these competencies can be found in other artistic and scientific domains. Examples of these habits of mind and competencies in maths and science can be found in Aczel (1996) and Watson (1968).
- 2 Notable exceptions are discussed in Bresler (2008) and include the work of van Schalkwyk (2002), Gouzouasis and LaMonde (2005) and Bresler (2005, 2007).
- 3 I have taught on occasion intensive mini-courses in other countries, including Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Spain and the Netherlands.
- 4 A theme on which I elaborate in Bresler (2006).
- 5 Important exceptions in philosophy, for example, include Heraclites, Hegel, Nietzsche and Dewey.
- 6 While qualitative research celebrates holism and contextuality, it aims, like art, to focus on some, not all, aspects of the world.
- 7 A compelling description of these processes in choral music can be read in Silvey (2004).
- 8 These three aspects are reminiscent of Harry Broudy's scanning (Broudy, 1972) and indeed are foundational to all hermeneutic analysis.
- 9 Armstrong's lingering caress is reminiscent of Gadamer's (1988) 'tarrying' – the need to attend and stay, remain back, linger with works of art.
- 10 It can never be completely open, of course, as we always bring to our perception and interactions our 'I'. However, a quest for an open-ended stance requires a very different listening gesture than the conventional listening, for example, in talk-shows and news interviews.
- 11 The art of improvisation, as the concept is ordinarily used in Western discourse about music, appears to be quite different from the improvisation processes that are necessary in ordinary speech, or from

- improvisation as a way of dealing with emergencies, as the term is used in colloquial speech, as pointed out by Bruno Nettl (Nettl, 1998: 2)
- 12 While musicians are engaged in improvisational processes as part of their professional training, the qualities of improvisation (as well as connection and communication) are inherent to human encounters at large.
 - 13 The increasing demand for specificity of settings and procedures before beginning the study by the IRB (Institutional Review Board) restricts improvisation of settings, but can be negotiated by modifications.
 - 14 A radical change of design due to the outbreak of World War I and the fact that he was stuck in his research setting for four years rather than the brief original plan.
 - 15 Here, I am paraphrasing Tom Barone (1990) who suggested that when used for educational purposes, a text of qualitative inquiry is better viewed as an occasion rather than as a tool.
 - 16 In the spirit of the Nobel Prize winner, Naguib Mahfouz, who suggested that 'You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions' (Gelb, 1999: 2).

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