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Embracing a learner identity: An Autoethnographic duet exploring disruptive critical incidents in instrumental music pedagogy

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Abstract

Curricular reforms in Western countries call for pedagogical practices that empower and transform students into professional musicians who have the capacity for deep critical thinking and engagement. For this, several pedagogical frameworks that place the student at the centre of learning have been considered during the last decades. This constructivist trend emphasises the need to work with students at deep levels (cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally) and recognises the need for teachers to be open to also learning and developing through processes of transformative pedagogies.

Moving beyond traditional forms of research in music education and music psychology, the authors explore autoethnography as catharsis for conceptual change. Through this process they explore disruptive critical incidents during their musicians-teachers-researchers-learners' trajectories that led to a transformation of their educational practices and teacher identities. After

recognising their own instrumental teachers often inhibited (however inadvertently) their learning, the authors recount the shock they felt in realising they were falling into the same traps in their teaching. Exploring their way through the ensuing chaos, both turned to research, to experimentation and insights from students in a quest to learn and embody pedagogical theories in their practice. They describe how clarity in teaching was found not through faulty identities as ‘expert teachers’, but by embracing their *learner identities*, enabling them to become ‘learners as facilitators’.

In embracing and sharing the discomfort of vulnerability the authors have aimed to create an engaging and evocative text in the hope that others will engage with their stories and find resonance in their own learning and teaching journeys. This article concludes with the authors’ visions for the future of instrumental music teaching and pedagogy. Recognising the need for dissemination of pedagogical insights and sharing of practice, they call for greater professional learning and sharing within instrumental music pedagogy at large, focusing on the importance of critical reflection and transformative teaching philosophies underpinned by scholarship. This, they argue, provides great potential for a much-needed paradigm shift, whereby every student learns their experiences, their voices and their individual goals and needs matter.

Keywords

Autoethnography, instrumental music pedagogy, constructivism, learner identity, transformative pedagogy.

By telling the stories, such as our own, we are able to reflect on those events and characteristics which have shaped our professional identities as well as our pedagogical culture and teaching strategies. (Schlinder, 1991, p. 181)

Curricular reforms in Western countries call for pedagogical practices that develop professional musicians and empower and transform students. For this, several pedagogical frameworks that place the student at the centre of learning have been considered during the last decades. This constructivist trend acknowledges the importance of working with students at deep levels (cognitively, emotionally, behaviourally) and being open to learning from them through processes of transformative pedagogies. For transformative pedagogy to be fully realised in music settings, teachers need to be open and be willing to self-reflect and enquire into their practices so that they may continue to grow (Gaunt & Carey, 2016; McAllister, 2008). Thus, with this paper, we aim to explore the power of our journeys from supposed ‘expert teachers’ to ‘learners as facilitators’. This paper presents a journey of “becoming pedagogical” (Gouzouasis, 2011; Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, & Gordon, 2013); of becoming mindful of the changing landscape of our profession and of the implications for our teaching practices. With this work, we recognise the impact and complexity of the student-teacher relationship in one-on-one music education settings (e.g. Gaunt, 2011).

This article explores the question: How do disruptive critical incidents in musicians’ experiences as teachers and learners lead to transformation of educational practices? Through sharing our own journeys, we hope to empower other teachers to explore the potential of transformative,

student-centred approaches to learning; to have their own ‘aha’ moments through reflecting on disruptive critical incidents (e.g. Burnard, 2000, 2004; Denicolo & Pope, 1990; Woods, 1993) and to use these insights to enhance their own studio practices.

What follows is a narrative autoethnography built on introspection (e.g. Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as a form of pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2000; in music, Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015; Gouzouasis & Ihnatovych, 2016; Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016) in which we have reflected upon critical incidents during our journeys as music educators and music learners in the search for ‘lost constructivism’ (paraphrasing Pérez-Echeverría, Mateos, Pozo & Scheuer, 2011). More specifically, our autoethnographic duet is framed within Creative Analytical Practice studies (e.g. Gouzouasis, 2019) that aim to bridge the theory-practice divide by placing personal experience at the service of research, knowledge and scrutiny. This autoethnography joins the “wave of self-reflexivity sweeping across the music profession” (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009, p. 6), including in the area of pedagogy, where “teachers are reflecting on themselves as learners and critiquing the values and relationships they embody in the classroom with their students and subject matter” (ibid).

We, the researchers and researched (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), come from different parts of the world (Spain and Australia), and while we have taught and learnt in different contexts, we share similar teaching philosophies that have brought us together. We are both in our mid-thirties, identify as female, currently hold academic positions in higher music education institutions and hold a multi-professional profile as musicians-teachers-researchers-learners.

We met in August 2019 to discuss our teaching journeys, framing our conversations based on different critical phases that are most likely to occur at particular times in individuals' lives (Strauss, 1959). We recorded and transcribed our conversations to ensure the multifaceted aspects embedded in our experiences, such as the socioemotional (in line with Gouzouasis & Ihnatovych, 2016; Leggo, 2008), pedagogical and interpersonal factors could be captured and explored from multiple angles to construct thick descriptions and rich narratives. This process was only possible through a willingness to operate through a self-vulnerability that provided deeper insights than would otherwise not be possible (Behar, 1997).

While our stories are our own, it is understood by the educational community that much can be learned from the unique experiences of individuals (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Flyvbjerg 2006) and that the practical wisdom of teachers plays an important role in informing others' pedagogical strategies (Gelder, 2005, p. 41). While the themes below may provide reflective points for the reader to relate with their own story, our discoveries are not designed to be prescriptive; every individual's catalysts for reflection and change are, of course, unique to themselves.

Phase one – Retrospect: Teachers limiting learning

Guadalupe and Leah, despite having vastly different childhood experiences with learning an instrument, faced challenges with their thirst for learning being thwarted (however inadvertently) by their teachers. Guadalupe learned in a formal music school, where her teachers limited her learning to what they considered to be ideal for beginners. She recalls having no choice in the music she played or what she learned: "I was learning technique without expression, dictation and history without connection to practice, and was forced to follow cello annotations not

suitable to my small hands. I felt like I was being punished through these restrictions, and I remember constantly thinking, ‘this system sucks!’ I was also constantly rewarded externally, and as I progressed rather quickly, competition was encouraged, and unhealthy pressure followed.”

Leah learned in less formal setting, having a variety of teachers with home studios. Starting keyboard lessons as a seven-year-old, she remembers annoying her teacher with endless questions of ‘why’, yearning to understand the theory behind the notes: “I think he thought I was too young to understand but his standard response of ‘you don’t need to know that’ wasn’t going to cut it. One day he relented, using one lesson to explain basic chord theory before returning to follow the method book. I was so happy in that lesson, and I hope he learned not to underestimate an inquisitive mind.” Later, Leah recalled her despair when being taught by a concert pianist: “It was an extreme example of just because you can play, doesn’t mean you can teach. He would demonstrate the sounds he wanted but didn’t (or couldn’t) explain how to create them. I was desperate to improve, but I wasn’t being taught technique and my questions were never answered adequately. I would be close to tears throughout my lessons, and cry in frustration straight after.”

Leah oscillated between being self-taught and recognising the need for a teacher but didn’t find a teacher who nurtured her as a learner until she was 27. Guadalupe learned how to fit in with her teachers’ expectations while also teaching herself ‘in secret’. She rebelliously wondered why teachers should have control over what was learned, and like Leah, found her musical identity outside the confines of traditional education settings.

Phase two – Shock: Early experiences as instrumental music teachers

Like many new teachers, Guadalupe and Leah relied on method books, both recalling: “I had no idea what I was doing”. Guadalupe remembers hating teaching but continuing because she needed the money: “I found no joy teaching the same way I had hated, but it was the only way I knew. I was frustrated that while some students excelled, others weren’t improving. It wasn’t like I was teaching them any differently, and so I couldn’t understand what was going wrong.” Then Guadalupe read a book called *Masters and Learners* (Pozo, 2008) and started analysing the master-apprentice model, uncovering her first pedagogical insights: “I finally understood what had been wrong in my own learning. I felt renewed horror about my teachers’ approaches and mortified that I was falling into the same traps.”

Leah gained her first pedagogical insights during the final year of her Honours degree in 2009: “Once I learned about student-centred pedagogy – eight years into my teaching – I prided myself on prioritising students’ needs. But despite this, students were still quitting. I still had trouble engaging them and instilling the importance of effective practice. I was still mostly dependent on method books and the exam syllabus and was inadvertently controlling students’ learning. It turns out I wasn’t the student-centred teacher I thought I was.” Leah remembers the day she discovered her understanding of student-centred pedagogy was flawed, half-way through her PhD which explored transformative pedagogy (Coutts, 2016): “I was mortified and started to question my teaching abilities. None of the transformative strategies I had been trialling were working, and I was pretty sure I’d been botching up my students’ learning – the exact opposite of my intentions. And worst still, if I’m completely honest, I’d been silently blaming them for any

resistance they displayed. My teaching world as I'd known it came crumbling down and I didn't know how to pick up the pieces.”

While the discomfort they both felt is not a pleasant headspace to be in to say the least, it is through this “inherent uncertainty” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 29) that new perspectives start to emerge, leading to further research and insights into challenges faced (Sandretto, 2009). There is a deep unease recognising that your pedagogical intentions and actions – or your espoused theories and implicit theories in action (Argyris & Schön, 1974, as cited in Eraut, 1994) – don't align. Addressing this issue is complex because translation of learning theory into action is a highly subjective process (Cleaver & Ballantyne, 2014) with no step-by-step process to follow.

Phase three – Chaos: Metamorphosis from ‘expert teacher’ to ‘learner as facilitator’

Through Guadalupe and Leah's discussion, it became clear that their shock and despair was the catalyst for change, and that there was one commonality guiding them forward: learning from students, which enables teachers and students to transform through the learning process (Abrahams, 2005; Etting, 2006). For Guadalupe, this occurred through interviewing 60 children and their teachers as part of her PhD (i.e. López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014a, 2014b). Guadalupe recounted the heartbreak she experienced hearing students' experiences with traditional lessons and the revelations that appeared through discussions with students from constructivist lessons. The latter group of students expressed learning being rich, relaxed and expressive. From this point, Guadalupe committed to implementing these principles in her own teaching. She

remembers: “everybody started to play better. They started to come more enthusiastically to lessons; parents were thrilled – it was happy and so lovely.” Something had also changed within herself; her relationship with teaching evolved from one of hate to one of love.

But this wasn't an overnight transition. Guadalupe described having to “build a Mary Poppins bag of constructivist strategies” to ensure students are engaged and progressing. Fuelled by the recognition that she had not only suffered herself, but had also caused great suffering in her first students, Guadalupe took a metacognitive approach to teaching (e.g. Borkowski & Muthukrishna, 1992), including sequential logic to pedagogically apply the principles one at a time to lessons in order to achieve conceptual change (in the line of Vosniadou, 2008). She quickly recognised that strategies are important, but they are not a magic bullet; they apply differently to every student, and there is a need to remain pedagogically agile (Carey & Grant 2016), adapting to the individual needs of the student at any given moment. Guadalupe evolved over a five-year period from “a perfectionist teacher wanting students to play perfectly to wanting students to own their learning”. As she described: “I'm not a teacher anymore; I'm more like a coach or a guide/facilitator” in line with that of “*We cannot teach another person; we can only facilitate his learning*” (Rogers, 1951, p. 389).

For Leah, learning from students was also a process catalysed through her PhD (Coutts, 2016), which took a teacher-researcher approach (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Recognising her failed attempts to enhance student engagement, Leah deconstructed videos of her teaching (as recommended by Derry, 2007). In doing so, she noticed one student was naturally more engaged than others; she was more reflective and curious, and more forthcoming with her challenges and

questions. As a result, Leah realised she approached teaching differently and committed to developing this approach with her other students (see Coutts, 2019). The largest lesson learned was that modelling, instructing, questioning and guiding each have a place in an effective lesson, but without rapport, relevance and developing students' self-efficacy, their effectiveness remains limited (Coutts, 2018; 2019).

Through their metamorphosis Guadalupe and Leah became *transformative facilitators*, whereby changes not only occurred in their teaching practices, but in the ethos by which they approach teaching. They had developed teaching philosophies – something they had never considered in their early days of teaching – which helped to create a new way of being present with their students. Their focus became understanding students' experiences and nurturing their learning through mutual exploration. This was a far cry from focusing on the notes on the page and correcting students' mistakes.

Phase four – Clarity: The essence of meaningful learning

Clarity in Guadalupe and Leah's teaching came not only from understanding constructivist learning theories and respective strategies, nor from trialling new teaching approaches, nor from reflecting on their practices, but from each of these elements combined. They committed to taking risks, to never being complacent that they had arrived as 'expert teachers' and to challenge themselves to remain curious. In that regard, they recognise that as professional teachers, adopting a learner identity (Larsen, 2017) and identifying as continuous learners (Coll & Falsafi, 2010) is crucial to their ongoing development. This kind of identity, which has received very little attention to date, particularly in music studies, helps to build knowledge in

relation to “who we are” in a given domain, but also from that of “what we are not” (Reay, 2010, p. 2) – what we want to be and still need to achieve our goals and dreams, something of constant changing character. As Biggs and Tang (2011) explain:

When you stand in front of a mirror what you see is your reflection, what you *are*.

Transformative reflection is rather like the mirror in Snow White: it tells you what you *might be*. This mirror uses theory to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be. (p. 43)

While they can now view their teaching approaches with renewed clarity, this does not mean teaching is easy; on the contrary, approaching lessons in this way requires increased effort, deeper commitment and continual self-reflection. And even then, not all students are ready to step into a constructivist or transformative lesson regardless how much the teacher invites them. Leah recalls: “The hardest lesson I’ve had to learn as a teacher is that I can’t learn *for* them.” As with teacher transformation, student transformation takes time, and it is up to the teacher to continue to model effective learning, invite students to join them and to be patient and understanding along the way. While this is much easier said than done, as acknowledged by international research on the challenges of activating student-centeredness in the music classroom (Pozo, Pérez-Echeverría, Torrado & López-Íñiguez, 2020), Guadalupe and Leah have seen the joy, growth and commitment it can create in students and the increased engagement for students and teachers alike.

Phase five – Hope: Visions for the future

Learning and teaching is not about the craft; it's about communication, empathy and rapport.

Until focus moves beyond *what* we teach to focus on *who* we teach (and *how* and *why*), pedagogy is being held to ransom, and the price is students' learning. Leah cautions, “while there's much focus in the literature about teaching how we were taught being part of the problem (in education more broadly, e.g. Oleson & Hora, 2014; and in music, e.g. López-Íñiguez & Pozo, 2014a), modelling of teaching is not the issue; what is being modelled is. Longitudinally, if we can shift to constructivist and transformative approaches, then this will become the model for future teachers. At that point, teaching how they were taught (through a constructivist and transformative approach) will become encouraged.” Similarly, Guadalupe described her vision as this becoming the norm “so that from the very first lesson students develop not only musical skills, but interpersonal and critical thinking and reflection skills.” Most importantly, Leah and Guadalupe share a vision of every instrumental music student learning that their experiences, their voices and their individual goals and needs matter.

But for teachers to adapt their teaching approaches, guidance, support and encouragement is required (Carey et al., 2017). To this end, Guadalupe created a guide (López-Íñiguez, 2017; extended version in López-Íñiguez, Pérez-Echeverría, Pozo & Torrado, 2020) that provides information about constructivist instrumental music teaching and learning and offers reflective considerations for putting constructivist theories into practice. As Guadalupe noted: “It took 10 years of terrible teaching and 10 years reflecting, studying and experimenting in my teaching. That's 20 years to change my teaching practice. I don't want others to have to waste so much time.” Research into how transformative approaches such as the Critical Response Process are

being adapted for instrumental and vocal tuition (Carey & Coutts, 2018) and how transformative approaches to lessons might evolve (Coutts, 2018; 2019) is also being conducted and disseminated, but Guadalupe and Leah recognise this cannot wait for established teachers to seek solutions to challenges that could have been mitigated. Both Guadalupe and Leah feel a sense of responsibility for catalysing others' reflective journeys to becoming learners as facilitators, contributing to what they believe is a much-needed paradigm shift.

Final reflections

Transforming our teaching practices and sharing our journeys has required us to embrace the uncertainty and courageous vulnerability that comes with taking risks (Brown, 2018). We recognise there is a growing number of music educators embracing a learner identity and operating through a constructivist and transformative instrumental music education paradigm. The more these educators share their stories with others, collaborate and embrace the messy chaos of authentic teaching, the quicker this paradigm shift will be widespread.

As we discovered, underpinning teaching practice with scholarship is also integral to this paradigm. Teachers have a responsibility to continue to develop professionally (Carey et al., 2017), to learn to reflect critically and to adapt their practice accordingly. This is integral to teachers and students alike to embrace their learner identities (Coll & Falsafi, 2010) and the necessary conceptual change (Vosniadou, 2008) required for that to happen. Or, in Senge's (1990) words,

People with a high level of personal mastery live in a continual learning mode. They never 'arrive'. Sometimes, language, such as the term 'personal mastery' creates a

misleading sense of definiteness, of black and white. But personal mastery is not something you possess. It is a process. It is a lifelong discipline. People with a high level of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, their incompetence, their growth areas. And they are deeply self-confident. Paradoxical? Only for those who do not see the ‘journey is the reward.’ (p. 142)

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