# Improvisation, music and learning: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

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## Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Lived experience
Idiographic
Interpretive: situating subjectivity
Hermeneutic – double hermeneutic
Iterative – the part and the whole

**Improvisation**

From Sports: Bjurwill (1993) "thinking-in-action"

From Fire-fighting Management: Weick:
'Thinking and doing unfold simultaneously'

From Reflective Practice: Schon
'On the spot surfacing, criticizing, restructuring, testing of intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena.'

'Knowing-in-action'

From Organisation: Baker, Miner and Eesley
'Improvisation occurs when the design and execution of novel activities converge'

From Management: Weick:
'There is no split between creator and interpreter; and no split between design and production'

From Theatre: Spolin:
'Playing the game; setting to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment to work for you in solving a problem'

'Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood.'
(Bailey, 1992 p. ix)

'If you have a road map that tells you how to get somewhere then fine, when you get there leave the map and go and do your business why I'm going there is for some kind of relationship whether with nature or with some people, now that's the heart business. Leave the map we're going to do the heart to heart.'
Oleyumi Thomas (Rose, 2008)

'To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematisation is an abstract and derivative sign language as is geography in relation to the country-side in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.'
Merleau-Ponty  2009 (PP p ix)

'My attitude is that the musical and the real worlds are one. Musicality is a dimension of perfectly ordinary reality'
Cardew in Tilbury (2008, p. 312)

'I am not so much interested in constructing a building, as in having a perspicuous view of the foundations of possible buildings.'
Wittgenstein (1981, p. 458)

## Aim

The research aim is to explore the creative process of improvisation in music with a specific emphasis of investigating potential for learning.

## Findings

*Themes of improvisation*
Describing free improvisation
Learning
Process
Body
Strategies

# Describing free improvisation

Environment

*… you're creating an environment,  you're also interacting with one  so you have to pay attention.*
(SG, p. 1, l. 6)

Social improvisation

*socio-musical location… what you're hearing is
the flow of intelligence and thinking…*
(SG p. 7, l. 23)

Inclusive

*everyone's creative – no negotiation*
(LM, p. 3, l. 8)

*... you become virtuosic in different ways but
there is such a thing that I really love which I
call social virtuosity  it's a collective virtuosity
which is multi... you know, not  streamed.
And again John* (John Stevens) *was a master
of that - mixed ability virtuosity. That has
its own particular power. There is something
phenomenal about a group of different
experiences, making really strong performance
in music.'*
(LM, p. 10, l. 14)

Human Capability

*Music is just one domain of the improvisative experience, you know, and as you start to find out how vast that experience is, how many levels it has, you don't want to privilege music over all the others, which ends up making a limitation on it.*
(SG, p. 15, l. 22)

Real-time composition

*I think that I study composition and improvisation as a parallel because what I'm striving for is to be able to create spontaneous composition. And I think that this helps me know how composition works and then you can apply these principles during an improvisation - if you look around at the great composers, I mean they all improvised. I just feel it's important, for me, to study music as a whole.* (LR, p. 1, l. 6)

# Learning

## Improvisation as learning

*… what I've done and continue to do is try to improve all the time so that I'm able to speak in any kind of situation… because it's also a thinker's game. So you want to be able to have the long-range thinking.*
(LR, p. 6, l. 27)

*The next step here was to realize that it was about personal transformation, you would have to come to the improvisation as a changed individual and transformed yourself as the kind of human being who can operate in a large space and a lot of that was quite prosaic and obviously, if everyone's playing all the time the textures are not going to be that diverse. So that means, realistically, in a large group you're going to spend most of your time listening.*
(SG, p. 10, l. 2)

Improvisation and education

*Some years ago I was asked to give a sort of
lecture demonstration to the* [name removed]
*for their new Improvised Music module. That
was run by* [name removed] *not an improviser,
of course, they usually aren't. And they were
interested students and they knew a bit…
to get their credit for the module they had to
write a graphic score, which was then assessed
by the tutor, you know this was the improvisation
module… So that puts your finger on certain
aspects of the problems of dealing with, what
we would understand as improvisation within
an academic situation…*
(RJ, p. 14, l. 19)

Improvisation, learning and hegemony

*...we intend to take over our own destinies, to*
*be our own agents, to play our own music.*
(Muhal Richard Abrams, in Lewis, 2008)

Improvisation and knowledge

*... some of the skills we most value in our
educational system are thoroughly alien to the
spontaneous modes of functioning of the
human mind.*
Margaret Donaldson (1978, p.15)

**Process**

## Interdisciplinary improvisation: human interaction

*… this guy Phil Jackson… he's the coach of the Lakers, and he had this book right all about improvisation, in basketball… it's based on this theoretical book written by his assistant coach in the 50's… he would say this funny thing like, the team would be losing and usually the thing is, you got somebody saying 'the team is losing take out person X and put in person Y' but his thing was 'well the team is losing, we'll let them work it out. [laughs] … that's why it's so entertaining to watch, even though I'm not a big basketball fan, you can see them working it out improvisationally how to do things, it was an expression of trust in their ability to work it out for themselves. And I learnt a lot from that for improvised music.*
(SG, p. 6, l. 21)

## Process and learning

*I mean did you learn anything about the things that you can learn from improvised music the nature of consciousness or the nature of communication, things that really matter, things that you can really learn from improvisation, that you can learn all the time... some of them were really onstage for to create a nice commodity, that they could package in some way and that they could get a repeatable outcome from. That's a different problem, that's not my issue not now, maybe it was a long time ago.*
 (SG, p. 12, l. 30)

## Self-determination and the process of free improvisation

*... it just became more and more of who I was, or who I am, and just felt more and more convinced that that's what improvising for me was, it was just a totality of whatever, of the history, the now, the other musicians, the environment, what's going on in the world, politically, all those things and... it varies all the time as well.*
(LM, p. 7, l. 8)

Trust

*There's an organisation called Permaculture…  It's all about learning from nature, observing nature, which is what people did before, you know, before capitalism broke. Anyway, it's about minimum input and maximum output…  Just let it be self-regulating, however chaotic that might be and trust that out of that chaos will come the clearings, will come the new growth, will come the coherence. And it does, when you trust it and if enough people trust it then of course that affects the whole thing.*
(LM, p. 15, l. 1)

Risk

*... then that person is maybe trying to learn too – again it hinges on the personal transformation thing, how open are you? How vulnerable can you make yourself, how open to change, how malleable, mutable as I think Evan used to say...*
(SG, p. 20, l. 29)


*...if new communication, a new experience doesn't happen then there is no reason to go on stage.*
(NJ, p. 9, l. 46)

## Human capability

*Increasingly I find the same structures are active all the time... you're engaged in a continual kind of analysis of what's going on, what other people are doing, what the environment is doing.*
(SG, p. 2, l. 8)

The process of improvisation and political assertion

*I think this spirit of improvisation is really what we need, rather than imagining great, grand narratives of progress which then gets disrupted as people panic and then turn to extremism it would be better if we just had confidence in our own powers of improvisation...*
John Gray – philosopher, author (2012)

'Within the newness of the technological revolution the improvisatory capability becomes apparent. Individuals and groups are acting with new technology's potential in new and unforeseen ways the most noticeable examples of which are: impromptu gatherings, events and protests; hacking; whistle blowing; and so on. At a political level such improvisatory action employing the internet has already contributed to major changes in the world.
*Innovation* in the development of such new technology is also a significant theme for understanding improvisation. For organisational thinking new technology's relationship with improvisation has significant implications.
(Rose, 2012)

Improvisation processes in nature

*... you're creating an environment, you're also interacting with one - so you have to pay attention.*
(SG, p. 1, l. 6)

**Body**

Embodied knowledge

*... working methods: first play, listen to it, then talk about it. Translating something that is embodiment, embodied sound making, then translate it into spoken word after the fact, which is really the right order.* (UP, p. 2, l. 1)

*The body knows what to do... this is a very important aspect to improvisation... allowing the body to lead... Creative consciousness – but it's not necessarily from the conscious mode that it comes. Different modes of consciousness: body consciousness is faster than thinking consciousness.* (UP, p. 5, l. 1)

## Holism

*... the other bit of metaphor or idealism is what it felt like to be in a group where a sense of musical oneness which can go beyond music ...  a oneness was being created. So the feeling of being on a creative high and losing one's self in that creative process rather than intellectualizing or making it into an abstract where I'm saying to myself, 'Oh this is going on now, I think I ought to do this.' So it's stepping aside from that logico deductive space into more emotional fields I suppose.*
(KM, p. 3, l. 17)

## Kinaesthetic learning

*...It's the speed and the speed is part of the excitement. To be able to do things almost ahead of your self, that's really fucking exciting, I love that.*
(KB, p. 7, l. 19)

Listening

*As we sit here there's a lot of sound going on.
It's about modes of attention: inclusive
attention and exclusive attention and being
able to negotiate both at once...sometimes
we are focusing in that way and also it can be
expanded to include whatever else is
happening around.*
(UP, p. 6, l. 36)

## Physical performance and free improvisation

*I'm trying to create something that's of interest to the people sat in front of me, basically, and myself. If I see a bunch of bored faces, I've failed, you know. I normally bring a theatrical element to my playing, something a bit visual. I mean I don't overdo it but I mean I don't stand there like a statue and play and 20 minutes later step from the spot when I've finished, I don't play like that, I try to use the space.*
(NA, p. 5, l. 46)

Inter-subjectivity, inter-corporeality and free improvisation

'Improvisation is participatory, it occurs through shared processes. KM's description of the experience of *'oneness'*, interpreted as unity, is located within the group. Our being-in-the-world is a simultaneous being with others being-in-the-world (*mitsein*), experienced here through participation in the act of free improvisation. Two terms that help convey this are inter-subjectivity (Huserl) and inter-corporeality.' (Merleau-Ponty).

# Strategies

Spontaneity and free improvisation

*... everyone's trying to avoid the familiar and stick with the spontaneous. The problem is most of the time what spontaneity produces is the familiar.* [laughs]
(SG, p. 17, l. 6)

*... what I'm striving for is to be able to create spontaneous composition. And I think that this helps me know how composition works and then you can apply these principles during an improvisation.*
(LR, p. 1, l. 8)

*...you revel in the combinations, which are potentially infinite.*
(SG, p. 16, l. 19)

Social improvisation

*I think it's important to establish lasting relationships with musicians and I've been fortunate from that point of view, to have come along at that time when there was a group of people who were interested and had a vision about how they wanted their destinies to go. I terms of not just their music but their philosophy and the way they were thinking they were going to have some control over their lives.*
(LR, p. 2, l. 10)

Collaboration

RJ*... perhaps the most unique thing about this
practice is that if it's group playing it's a
collaborative process involving often contradictory
creative input of other people. Things that
you wouldn't have thought of yourself, things that
you may not agree with, things that will force you
to operate in a way that you weren't expecting.
And I find that very intrinsic to the improvising
process and what makes it, when it works, almost
the most interesting music you can get. It is my
particular interest. It is this thing of how to
maintain your own personality, yet use it to make
musical sense with the people you're working
with and to accept their intentions to be as
important as your own.*
(RJ, p. 7, l. 21)

Autodidactism

*… we're self teaching, we're learning from
each other… We do an autodidact process,
with the outcome of which we don't even know*
[laugh]. *So we're teaching ourselves to do some
thing that we don't really know what it is.
We're just looking for an outcome and we'll
know it when we see it, and that's a part of
improvisation too.*
(SG, p. 14, l. 36)

Practise

*I think there is something about music because it
requires the development of sophisticated motor
skills in one way or another, whether it's
manipulating a laptop or an acoustic instrument
and the way you develop motor skills is largely
through practise...I think they're far more likely to
generate some interesting music if they've done
a lot of practise. the key thing is whether they
are motivated to practise at all, I mean spend time.*
(KM, p. 10, l. 12)

Formal and non-formal education and improvisation

*KM … we had a piano in the house, when I was a child and I used to spend ages improvising, experimenting.*
*SR What age were you?*
*KM Er, as soon as I could remember, 3 onwards any way. And I do remember I used to sing as well. Probably to everybody's chagrin and eh, typical kiddie's stuff. I've no idea what the melodic lines were like, but they were ideas about puppy dogs* [laughs] *and all sorts of things. And then on the piano I do remember loving the generation of chords ,and leaning on the black notes and just making a lot of racket. And so my folks said would I like piano lessons when I was 6 or 7. And I said yes, please, and as soon as I started them it killed it stone dead.*
(KM p. 1, l. 5)

# The 'unity' of themes of improvisation

# Summary of the conclusions

**Describing Improvisation**
Human capability – creating an environment
Reflected by interdisciplinary activity, across arts and other
areas of human activity
Improvisation's heterogeneity leads to development and
renewal – questioning orthodoxy
Real-time composition
Its 'unrepeatable moment' is expression of being-in-the-world

**Improvisation and Learning**
Learning was embedded in descriptions of the act of
improvisation
Improvisation relates to education through understanding of:
autodidactism; autonomous learning; participation;
heterogeneity; and a re-orientation of the role of the teacher

**Process and improvisation**
Improvisation is human interaction in diverse areas of activity:
human capability
Trust and Risk were identified as important themes of the
process
Improvisation is an opportunity for self-determination leading
to political assertion
Comparisons to processes in nature provided an orientation
for the process of improvisation in music
Improvisation resonates with the contemporary interest in
'real-time' functioning

**Body and improvisation**
Understood in terms of embodied knowledge
The body is also the pragmatic site of improvisation
The body 'grasps the world' in improvisation
Kinaesthetic learning
Listening
Inter-corporeality
Inter-subjectivity

**Strategies**
Interpretations of spontaneity
Centrality of the social setting
The aim to play in any setting implicitly acknowledges the 'other'
Strategies for improvisation and learning acknowledged the: formal and non-formal settings, autodidactism and 'training'; self-learning and institutional development in music
Technique is re-contextualised in improvisation and Practise reflects this
Knowledgeable/skilled assessment supports the improvisation activity

The themes of free improvisation: *Learning, Process, Strategies* and *Body* co-exist.

'Unity' in improvisation is through embodied, creative learning by doing.

Enacted free improvisation is a process of learning.

Participants in free improvisation compose music in 'real-time'.

The agency of improvisation engages difference in the socio-musical setting and becomes implicitly inclusive.

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