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Author(s)	Eugene Dairianathan and Peter Stead
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# Improvisation and Issues of Formal and Informal Learning; A Perspective From Singapore



**Eugene Dairianathan**

Nanyang Technological University  
Singapore  
eugene.d@nie.edu.sg

**Peter Stead**

Nanyang Technological University  
Singapore

## ABSTRACT

*Our paper deals with improvisation and the degree to which expert or formalised knowledge helps or hinders free improvisation. In Lucy Green's research on learning among musicians in popular culture, we note a similar lack of communication between formal training and the informal processes through which improvisational ability is acquired. Discussions on musical improvisation tend to concentrate on instrumental proficiency and musical conventions. However, as musical ability differs from culture to culture, so do expectations of musical improvisation. By studying the ways in which non-music specialists are enabled in musical improvisation, we aim to demonstrate the importance of informally acquired skill as well as discover processes that are common to those who are formally trained.*

*This paper relies on a study conducted between July and October 2005 where a group of Physical Education teachers participated in an undergraduate course on improvisation. Research data were obtained from their journal entries and essays. Our findings yield five observations about improvisation and non-music specialist teachers.*

- 1. Improvisational ability can be improved even for those who have had no formal musical training;*
- 2. The improvising activities of non-music teachers reveal a considerable variety and diversity of formal and informal resources;*
- 3. Non-music teachers' views of and about music compare favourably with ethnomusicological views of Blacking and "inclusive" views of Schafer;*
- 4. Enabling non-music specialist teachers has yielded a valuable and valid "informal" musical route to the teaching and learning of improvisation;*
- 5. The teaching and learning of musical improvisation via informal processes has helped non-music specialist teachers towards self-enablement in their everyday lives.*

*Besides underlining the importance of informal learning processes, enabling non-music specialists through musical improvisation challenges the privileging of "musical" skills in musical improvisation at the expense of the*

*uniqueness of "individually informed" skill. A challenging question for music education is which of these skills should be given priority and privilege in the teaching and learning of musical improvisation, and to what extent curricula in music institutions can support both modes of learning?*

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Despite a resurgent global perspective of improvisation, curricula for improvisatory techniques at tertiary institutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have continued to concentrate on the tonal repertoire of the Euro-American tradition between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, although in recent years this has been extended to include studies in popular culture and jazz. Three problems associated with improvisation are defined.

The first lies with the definition of improvisation. Magrini (1998:169) offers two reasons for suggesting *what is improvised is to some extent unpredictable*. One is an *aleatory and unsystematic character of the event* while a second identifies a lack of knowledge and information for those who experience it; citing historical evidence beginning with citations by the foremost scholar on improvisation, Ernst Ferand (1957).

Second, the perceived authority of historical evidence in the Euro-American art tradition determines institutional reception and treatment of musical improvisation as *regulated* practice. Consequently, instrumental proficiency, together with an understanding of relevant musical conventions, has traditionally determined improvising skill. This reveals a very limited focus on the skills involved in improvising.

The third problem lies in the nature, role and identity of musical improvisation in the global context. Blacking (1995: 224-225) suggests music emerges as *both the observable product of human intentional action and a basic human mode of thought by which any human action may be constituted*. Consequently, expectations will inevitably differ across cultures. Although

definitions of improvisation may have become broader and more sensitised to context, Nettl (1998) believes that it is propositional knowledge in western art music traditions that remains the dominant and dominating referential point. Such privileged authorisation stems firstly from attitudes towards societies or cultures where improvisation plays a significant role in practices in their arts, but possesses less significant currency and as such is not taken very seriously (Nettl, 1998:6). The teaching and learning of musical improvisation, therefore, either valorizes Euro-American art music traditions or considers improvisation as a kind of third world music (Nettl:1998:6-7). At best, it may develop improvisation skills in their narrowest sense; but at worst, it may devalue the essential nature of improvisation.

Improvisational ability must encompass *more* than the narrow-based expectations of instrumental virtuosity and fidelity to conventions in performance. Two examples observed by Sutton (1998:86) in Javanese gamelan practices draw on recovery from lapses in concentration and working with uncertainty in the performing present. However, Sutton's observations relegate improvisatory behaviours to the reflexive expertise of good musicians to recover from lapses of fidelity as well as revealing levels of experience in negotiating uncertainty and unpredictability.

Magrini's (1998) explanation of improvisation as inherently unpredictable devalues improvisational ability and implicitly endorses formal structures in the training and practice of improvisation. Such explanations only consign improvisation to *recovery* when improvisers are as likely to respond to circumstances beyond their control as chart the course of their responses. Both Magrini's (1998) and Sutton's (1998) accounts reinforce Berliner's (1994:492) lament that *popular definitions of improvisation that emphasise only its spontaneous, intuitive nature...are astonishingly incomplete.*

If improvisational ability is contingent on musical ability, Blacking (1973:100) suggests that what is ultimately of most importance in music...*is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed...all aspects of his/her behaviour are subject to a series of interrelated, structured systems, and when s/he improvises, s/he is expressing these systems in relation to the reactions s/he picks up from his/her audience.*

Blacking's (1973) observations articulate a dual dimension in improvisation. The first is that which is made possible through formal training and skills situated in a context-dependent and practice-

specific system. But the second and equally important dimension lies in intentional risking the uncertainty of circumstances and/or human behaviours. Following Berliner (1994), negotiating unpredictability cannot simply be explained away as reflexivity in the face of errors of omission or commission. Unpredictability may also be read as *intentional behaviour* in risk-taking.

Paraphrasing Green's (2002) observation of the ways popular musicians learn "informally", this intentional or unintentional negotiation of uncertainty compels a study of improvising behaviour *other than* musical techniques and conventions. Both dimensions are linked symbiotically in musical improvisation; *both* dimensions merit serious consideration and training. But any study of *informal learning* in the teaching and learning of improvisation, however, seems at odds with the authority of *formal training* translated as prior preparation, systematic training and regulation.

## AIM OF STUDY

Our paper deals with improvisation and the degree to which expert or formalised knowledge seems to hinder inclusion of a participant without the same level of expertise and questions the assumptions on which improvisational ability is contingent upon training towards such expertise. The crucial question is that of membership. Are those without prior training in music or improvisation capable of being enabled through informal learning processes when compared to those who possess skills and training?

We draw on Lucy Green's (2002, 2004) research on learning among musicians in popular culture and note, in the teaching and learning of musical improvisation, a gap between *formal training in improvisation* and *informal processes* by which improvisational ability has been acquired. By studying the ways in which non-music specialists are enabled in musical improvisation, we will demonstrate how important it is for any improviser to be aware of informally acquired skill to negotiate the *extramusical present* as much as the training to prepare one for the *musical presence*. We also aim to demonstrate how these informally acquired skills rely on more fundamental skill sets, which we argue, form the prerequisites for *any* improviser, training notwithstanding.

## CONTEXT OF STUDY

At our institution, improvisation is available as an unrestricted elective course and is open to all students on the undergraduate programmes.

Certified or formal musical skills are not used as criteria for selection of course participants.

This course has increasingly drawn substantial numbers of non-music specialists who have little or no formal practical music qualifications or training, although not an absence of prior musical experiences. The course has been run on a framework using a variety of keywords and media. Each week for instance, students work towards performances based on a variety of stimuli. Cross-cultural and historical perspectives on improvisation are introduced via listening excerpts and recorded performances by previous cohorts. Much of the module is based on experiential learning. They have at their disposal a free choice of musical instruments and voice, and they may also use their own musical instruments. Assessment components involve a weekly journal, an essay chosen from a list of questions, and a final performance. Group performances are video recorded with their permission and the knowledge that the recordings might be used as the subject of academic study and benefit of future cohorts.

## METHOD

In an earlier study, respondents were Malay language and culture specialists where respondents referred to themselves as *musically illiterate*. The emergent term in this exploratory study was *non music specialist teachers* (Dairianathan 2003). In this study in 2005, eighteen of the twenty-two participants were physical education teachers, and their narratives made for an equally compelling case study. As with the earlier study group, none of them possessed formal musical qualifications although a number of them played music informally. Data for this study was drawn from the following with their permission:

1. Journal reflections that cover every week of activity.
2. Excerpts from their written assignment that deals directly with their experiences of the module.

## REFLECTIONS

The students' written accounts correspond favourably with Green's (2004:228-236) articulation of ways in which musicians learn through musics of popular culture, which are tabulated below:

- Enculturation – “immersion in the music and musical practices of one's environment” (2004:228)
- Listening and copying
- Playing with peers
- Acquiring technique

- Informal acquisition of knowledge of technicalities
- Understanding practising
- Coming to terms with “feel”
- Encountering friendship and cooperation
- Articulation of enjoyment
- Expressions, implicit or otherwise, of self esteem
- Appreciation and respect for “other music”

The respondents were working with sources and resources familiar to them such as basketballs, hula hoops, lacrosse sticks and imputing value to them as musical instruments. Without the anchor of formal musical training, the students were more likely to focus more on procedural, informal extra-musical learning.

Pressing (1998) lists some of the demands expected of the improviser:

Effect real-time sensory and perceptual coding, optimal attention allocation, even interpretation, decision-making, prediction (of actions of others), memory, storage and recall, error correction and movement control, and further must integrate these processes into an optimally seamless set of musical statements that reflect both a personal perspective on musical organisation and a capacity to affect listeners. Both speed and capacity constraints apply (1998:51-52).

Despite these high expectations, their writings reveal confidence and assuredness. Their experiences suggest the activity of improvising leading to performance was based on “much consideration from planning to execution of improvisation”; an exercise of *thinking about* as well as *engaging in* improvisation.

Their engagement in this course has yielded positive aspects of informal learning of which five are given special attention:

First, improvisational ability can be improved in a short space of time, even for those who have had no formal musical training. In the words of one respondent in the weekly journal:

I don't know how to read musical notes in the first place! However, that did not deter me from improvising freely as we did in the module...without the teacher's intervention, performers would try to “piece” their own form of improvised music...This critical (mind the pun) aspect of beginning improvisation allows flexibility in performances as well as encourages introverted performers to practice in a more comfortable and non-threatening environment...improvising as a group has taught me to be more calm and confident about performing...peer support is important in helping...to cope with the anxiety of beginning performances...I experienced first-hand, the enjoyable processes of improvisation in music...I

find “improvisation” allows us to express ourselves individually (even though it’s a group performance) and helps us develop a more intimate relationship with music. Above all, this module has introduced the learning of “improvisation” in a fun and unrestricted way.

Second, improvising activities of non-music specialist teachers reveal considerable variety and diversity of formal and informal resources. Another respondent notes:

Improvisation requires the performers to be given time to think about what they want to improvise while using and...try[ing] out as many implements [instruments] as possible to experience the various sounds elicited... The class was always in engaged in a challenging learning environment where we were constantly striving to improvise not only on given themes but also to improvise on our use of [instruments]...Themes not necessarily single in interpretation and expression gave room for a greater degree of improvisation. One of the features of this module was the flexibility of the class to form their own groups for each performance. I had the chance to explore improvisation with different groups of people. I was able to learn and adapt to each different group and each time produce a different performance.

Third, non-music specialist teachers’ views of and about music compare favourably with Blacking’s (1995:224-225) views as *observable process and product of human intentional thought and action* and Schafer’s (1986:95) observation that *all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music*.

A respondent noted:

Improvisation to me had always been just playing “drums” on the tables in the canteen or trying to noodle on the guitar. This module not only tested our breadth in creativity, it also allowed us to explore and discover the wonderful outcome of our efforts and collective creative output. Improvisation was a crucial factor in achieving this experience. I managed to explore various musical instruments by combining them and playing differently on them. I was even encouraged to go beyond the use of musical instruments and explore the sounds created [by] using everyday objects. The myriad [possibilities] of improvised music that is readily available has given me new interest towards improvisation. This time round I feel I could make music in a more educated and constructive sense.

Fourth, in a comparison of accomplished practitioners and beginning participants (children) in *tshikona* in the Venda tradition, Blacking (1973:101-102) noted how both performances may have been *contrasting on the surface but identical in substance*. Similarly, abilities of enabled improvisers in this study group may be in

stark contrast to those of professional musicians, but the basic substantial processes remain the same. In the words of a respondent:

Throughout our course, we were given the freedom to interpret and express either a theme or free improvisation...First we took on the roles as improvisers during our lessons...we improved in our performance or expression of a particular idea because...we had grown to understand the importance of improvisation as we discussed our performances within our small groups...Secondly, improvisation became important to me through this module because I came to realize that to put up a good performance required me to successfully incorporate all the minor roles we were playing as well as the instruments chosen into one beautiful whole. Much consideration had to be placed into harmonizing the sounds and making sure they ended up sounding what we would like them to...or think of alternative sounds, sound making methods, or instruments. I learnt that an improvised piece cannot be perfectly repeated...even when we practised before the performance there would still be differing instances between those rehearsals and the final display. Improvising has taught me to look at one theme in many different ways...The module has brought me to understand improvisation in broader terms... I can also use it in my teaching career to put variety in the activities held in the classroom.

Fifth, informal learning of musical improvisation has empowered them towards self-enablement and applying lessons learnt to relevant aspects of their everyday lives. One respondent considers the application of such lessons in her own Physical Education environment:

I remember in a Physical Education teaching session, I faced a problem during my lesson activity with a class of Primary Three students. I was short of one floor marker to carry out that particular activity. I reacted on the spot by using my clipboard. This course has brought me to understand the meaning of improvisation in broader term. I can also use it in my teaching career to put variety in the activities held in the classroom; *I [can] look forward to applying the skills and knowledge that I have learnt in this module in my daily life as well as in my music making exploration.*

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Enabling physical education teachers in musical improvisation confronts fundamental issues of the teaching and learning of musical improvisation. If musical techniques, concepts and instrumental skills are accorded priority, how then has it been possible for a group of non-music specialist teachers to be enabled in musical improvisation through informal learning processes? Berliners study of jazz musicians (Weick 2001:299)

reminds us how newly minted graduates laden with technique risk failure not because of their lack of technique and training but because these formally acquired skills and resources are not enough to succeed in live ensemble situations. Sorrell (1992) believes that a good improvising musician is one “*whose intuition, imagination and inspiration enable[s] him or her to steer a course between...the obligatory and the forbidden.*”

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