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# Learning From the Experts: A Study of Free-Improvisation Pedagogues in University Settings

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**Abstract**

There is a growing interest in alternative forms of pedagogy for students in K–12 settings. Free improvisation, a relatively new and unfamiliar genre, offers potential as an ensemble for teachers to provide in order to offer more egalitarian and creative music experiences for their students. The purpose of this multiple case study was to determine common elements of instruction among four university free-improvisation instructors in order to inform K–12 music education. Pauline Oliveros, Fred Frith, Ed Sarath, and David Ballou were interviewed and observed in order to find common elements among their teaching. Data collection included transcripts from interviews and field notes, recordings, course materials, and other documents, such as course syllabi, university catalogues, texts, and press material about the pedagogues. The common themes that emerged among the four pedagogues included an array of unique teaching exercises, facility with nontraditional vocabulary, the establishment of a safe and egalitarian teaching space, lack of evaluation, leader as guide, comfort with spontaneity, and pedagogue as performer/improviser. The conclusion offers ideas for implementing these ideas in K–12 and music teacher education.

**Keywords**

improvisation, music pedagogy, creativity

"It's just music, really." These words and this sentiment from Pauline Oliveros resounded throughout my interview as she worked to convince me that the only reason

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she is successful at leading free-improvisation ensembles is because she has been doing it for over 60 years. She could not pinpoint a specific pedagogy—only experience doing it a long time, because, as she humbly stated, it is "just music." However, my motivation to learn from her and other master pedagogues of free improvisation stemmed from the scarcity of pedagogical understanding about this art form; free improvisation is not part of typical public school and university music experiences, yet it presents compelling musical possibilities for music educators and their students as it offers rich opportunities for egalitarian-based learning and creative music development. While the genre of free improvisation is alive and thriving in music centers of cities throughout the world, it is mostly absent from typical school and university music settings.

Improvising musician George Lewis (2007) highlighted three "particularly pressing" research questions for scholars interested in pedagogy of free improvisation, one of which is most pertinent to the present study: "How can new musical communities and social formations that presume the importance of improvisation be incorporated into the academy? . . . and what can be gained from theorizing these newer models of music making?" (p. 3). In light of Lewis's questions, the purpose of the present study was to examine and identify common pedagogical elements among master pedagogues of free improvisation in order to extend this practice to music learning in K–12 and music teacher education.

There is a growing interest in the study and implementation of alternative methods of music education in schools. The traditional conservatory model, which presents a one-way and autocratic approach, has been challenged by those espousing more democratic and socially equitable approaches in music education (e.g., Allsup, 2003, 2004; Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Woodford, 2005). While Green (2002, 2008) has provided an alternative approach that is aligned with child-centered pedagogies and modeled after the way popular musicians learn, Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) make a persuasive argument for a direct connection between "informal learning pedagogy" and free improvisation.

The genre of free improvisation, relatively little known even among music educators, provides possibilities for engendering creativity in classrooms with an immediacy unlike other more common forms of improvisation that require background knowledge and prelearned skills. The absence of free improvisation from schools might be attributed to a gap in understanding its methodology: How does one facilitate a free-improvisation ensemble or coach students to become free improvisers in music classrooms? There are only a few research studies and fewer texts with practical ideas to guide music teachers in facilitating free improvisation (e.g., Agrell, 2008, 2009; Stevens, 2007). In this study, I sought to learn how successful free-improvisation pedagogues in higher education teach in order to inform K–12 music education.

## Definition

*Improvisation* is music that is neither notated nor composed, and it is integral to a wide variety of music genres, styles, and cultures. The structures inherent to the genre

dictate the parameters or constraints of the improvisatory performance. For instance, in jazz, the structure is typically the chord changes along with melody "head," while in Persian music, the referent is a *radif*, an orally transmitted melodic figure (Nettl, 1974). Nettl (1974) labels the originating structures of improvisation "points of departure" and notes they are unique to, yet firmly established in, different improvising cultural traditions.

*Free improvisation*, conversely, is non-idiomatic, or as Ed Sarath describes it, transstylistic, in that "style parameters are a by-product of the process" (Sarath, Interview 1). Pelz-Sherman (1998) defines the genre (which he labels "Western improvised contemporary art music") as one in which group improvisers "make decisions about what to do at any given moment based primarily on their own imagination and interpretation of signals from the others" (p. 5) and wherein preestablished "referents" are kept to a bare minimum. Free improvisation is a young and unique genre that began to take shape in the early 1960s simultaneously in the United Kingdom and the United States as an offshoot of the free-jazz style often attributed to Ornette Coleman. The genre often is described as a blending of avant-garde European music with the African American tradition of jazz (Bailey, 1992; Lewis, 2004; Pelz-Sherman, 1998).[1] It is also referred to as "contemporary art music" or "contemporary Western improvisation." Since its emergence, free improvisation has spread to many countries throughout the world, is performed by a variety of dedicated artists, and, as Sansom (2001) notes, "has become (perhaps somewhat ironically), a genre in its own right, with associated record labels, media, significant artists, aficionados and performance rituals" (p. 29).

For the purpose of this study, the music I refer to when using the term *free improvisation* is best described by the following definition:

> Free improvisation or free music is improvised music without any rules beyond the logic or inclination of the musician(s) involved. The term can refer to both a technique (employed by any musician in any genre) and as a recognizable genre in its own right. ("Free Improvisation," 2012)

## Previous Research

The practice of free improvisation is limited to a relatively small and specialized group of musicians, takes place outside of school music, and has not been systematically studied, either empirically or practically, in K–12 music classrooms. However, there are recent philosophical writings urging its use in music education (Borgo, 2007; Lewis, 2007; Thomson, 2007) and a few current empirical studies that bring light to its use and impact with students as well as preservice music teachers. Current empirical studies most appropriate to this study will be reviewed here.

Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009) used Webster's (1994) Measure of Creative Thinking in Music (MCTM-II) to assess the impact of exploratory improvisation activities on the music creative thinking of 6-year-old children. Two groups of children were assigned randomly to either a control or an experimental group. The

experimental group experienced various teacher-led as well as free-improvisation and exploratory music activities involving instruments, body, and voice. The control group did not experience any improvisation activities during their lessons. The pre- and post-test results showed significant improvement in the total score and in three of the four creative thinking components of the MCTM-II (syntax, originality, and flexibility) for the experimental group and little improvement for the control group.

Moreira and Carvalho (2010) examined the use of non-genre-specific improvisation as a teaching tool through case studies of a 10- and a 14-year-old student, both in their first year of cello lessons. After 5 months of traditional lessons, exploration and improvisation activities were introduced in order to solve technical or music problems the students had shown during the first lessons. The exercises were exploratory and not genre based, such as exploring body sounds and trying to reproduce these on the cello or making a musical story from them. Both students showed improvement in arm relaxation, and hence quality of sound, once the improvisation lessons were incorporated.

Two studies looked at nonjazz improvisation in the context of music teacher education. Della Pietra and Campbell (1995) examined the efficacy of teaching nonjazz improvisation techniques to preservice teachers in order for them to feel more comfortable teaching their future students. The five models they drew from came from rhythmic percussion ensembles of China, Ghana, the Bahamas, Vietnam, and Brazil. Small groups of university preservice music teachers were assigned randomly to one of the genres and learned to improvise music in the style of their model. A qualitative analysis focused on two particular students who, despite coming from very different music backgrounds, found success in learning to improvise in the styles and expressed comfort in their future ability to teach their own students to improvise. Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) also looked at nonjazz improvisation as a tool for preservice music teachers. Ninety-one "teacher trainees" kept journals as they were enrolled in a course on free improvisation. Themes that emerged from the study of their journals included group as a collective, egalitarian enterprise, working toward a common music experience, finding one's personal voice, mutual respect between student and teacher, and learning to focus on the moment. More specifically, the authors found that three categories—autonomy, developing the self, and developing an open attitude toward children and their music—were the most important aspects of free improvisation that could contribute to the pedagogic preparation of teachers.

Studies by Kanellopoulos (1999), Lewandowski (2010), Lange (2011), and Burnard (2002) applied ethnographic lenses and participant-observation methodology to examine the efficacy of free improvisation with school-age children. Kanellopoulos examined the improvisations of ten 8-year-old children in a classroom filled with a variety instruments and in which the only direct instructions from the teacher were for the children to create. An analysis of video-recorded improvisations as well as students' reflections revealed the emergence of a "discursive community" (where children felt safe talking about their music), wholly improvised music pieces, thoughtful approaches to playing, and shared intentionality among players and audience.

Lewandowski (2010) engaged as a participant-observer at a private school for girls in Oakland, California, where she directed 12 weekly free-improvisation sessions with seven groups of sixth- and seventh-grade girls. Lewandowski, like Kanellopoulos (1999), found success in that students were able to comfortably showcase their creativity and thoughtfulness through the free-improvisation approach.

Lange (2011) is perhaps the only one who has examined free-improvisation *ensemble* pedagogy with middle and high school–age children. She spent time observing an ensemble of student improvisers at the Multicultural Education and Counseling for the Arts center in Houston, Texas. The purpose of her case study was to focus on the ways in which "one free improvisation ensemble both exemplifies and contradicts the visions of key theorists" (Lange, 2011, p. 1). The contradiction she imagined, and indeed discovered, was that the ensemble leader, at times, followed the traditional "teacher-to-student" model, although the greater outcomes of the experience for students fell in line with the egalitarian constructs that relate to free improvisation. She found that free improvisation "imparted exactingly unusual sonic standards to Houston students, and it socialized them in egalitarianism and artistic autonomy" (Lange, 2011, p. 2). Lange also found that the experience changed students' music practices, their senses of themselves, their understandings of power relations, and their experiences of the city in which they lived.

Burnard (2002), in her role as observer/researcher, focused on the music interactions of eighteen 12-year-old children who freely improvised weekly, without adult direction, as part of an informal lunchtime "Music Creators Sounding Club." Burnard found that the students not only thrived but demonstrated cooperative group decision making (selecting instruments, starting and stopping), the ability to negotiate and shift different group roles (leaders and followers), shared leadership responsibility, and overall skill at general group communicative gestures while playing.

Kanellopoulos (1999), Lewandowski (2010), Lange (2011), and Burnard (2002) share similar findings in their observations of students in free-improvisation settings. In all instances, the improvisations resulted in positive feelings, participants enjoyed their music making in a safe and egalitarian space, and they felt ownership of ideas and creativity amongst themselves.

The research findings point to the efficacy and benefits of free improvisation ensembles and activities for students, but little is known or has been studied about the teacher's perspective or approach. If we as music educators are to advocate for freer, more egalitarian approaches to improvisation in school music, then we may benefit from learning about the ways in which skilled pedagogues successfully facilitate these music experiences.

## *Purpose and Research Questions*

The purpose of the present study was to examine and identify common pedagogical elements among master pedagogues of free improvisation in university settings in order to inform the teaching of improvisation in K–12 settings. The model and inspiration for this research came from a study by Duke and Simmons (2006) in which the

researchers sought to determine common elements of instruction among three expert university classical instrument pedagogues. In this study, I examined the pedagogical techniques as well as the kinds of spaces and interactions that were created as a result of techniques employed by free-improvisation pedagogues.

The specific research questions were as follows: (1) What strategies and approaches do free-improvisation ensemble leaders utilize in facilitating their ensembles? (2) What role do these pedagogues view themselves as holding as ensemble leaders? (3) What dispositions were noticeable as either common or unique among the pedagogues observed? and (4) What other attributes in training, background, or other appear to be common among the pedagogues?

## Method

This study utilized a multiple case design (Yin, 2009) in which I observed and interviewed four expert improvisation pedagogues as they directed free-improvisation ensembles in university settings. The participants were "critical case" samples (Flyvbjerg, 2011) because they are uniquely successful pedagogues and performers of free improvisation, and they conduct free-improvisation ensembles at their respective universities. To identify the appropriate participants, I first contacted colleagues in the International Society of Improvised Music (ISIM) and through their recommendations began to investigate the programs and biographies of potential subjects. After receiving institutional review board approval, I then identified and contacted four individuals who fit the profile of the cases I wished to study and obtained permission to observe and interview them. The four participants are not only exceptional improvising musicians but also teachers in university settings where free-improvisation ensembles are recognized and offered for ensemble credit.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were Pauline Oliveros, Fred Frith, Ed Sarath, and David Ballou. A brief description of each is provided in Table 1, including links to their professional websites. Each agreed to meet with me for interviews and allowed me access to her or his rehearsals and classes. I observed three of them (Oliveros, Sarath, and Ballou) leading improvisation activities in both classes and/or ensembles at least two times. I was able to observe Frith's improvisation ensemble only once. The classes and ensembles I observed are detailed in Table 1.

Although this information offers a glimpse of what these pedagogues do—both as performers and as faculty members—it does not describe who they are as people. Below, I present a brief narrative portrait of the participants based on my personal interactions with them. In these portraits, I hope to highlight not only a sense of the persona of these individuals but also how my relationship with them was established.

*Ed Sarath.* On a crisp fall morning, as my colleague and I were driving onto the road that leads to the music building on the University of Michigan campus, we noticed Ed

**Table 1.** Participant Information.

| Name | Biographical Information | Description of Ensemble/Courses Observed |
|---|---|---|
| Pauline Oliveros | Distinguished Research Professor of Music at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, and Darius Milhaud Composer in Residence at Mills College in Oakland, California. http://www.paulineoliveros.us/ | Deep Listening: A class for undergraduate students in which students "explore different forms of listening including field recording" (from the online course catalog). The course includes a mixture of majors from across the campus, including science, technology, biology, and business students.<br>Arts 4962 and Arts 6962: A combination of a senior thesis seminar and a PhD colloquium for electronic arts majors. It is run as a seminar for students who, by virtue of being in the class, are members of the multimedia Tintinnabulate ensemble. |
| Ed Sarath | Professor of jazz and contemporary improvisation at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. http://edsarath.com/wordpress/ | Integral Basic Musicianship is a core sophomore theory elective, described in the catalogue as "improvisation-based approach to music theory."<br>Improvisation Forms is a two-credit class/ensemble described in the catalogue as "improvisation in an eclectic style." It is a prerequisite to the major free-improvisation ensemble, the Creative Arts Orchestra. |
| Fred Frith | Professor of music at Mills College in Oakland, California. http://www.fredfrith.com/ | Music Improvisation Ensemble II: Open only to graduates in the music improvisation program. "Revisiting the basic building blocks of music we will examine questions of form, rhythm, timbre, and melody from the improviser's perspective, while working to improve both individual and group improvising techniques. The semester will culminate in a public performance conceived and directed by the ensemble members" (from the university course catalog). |
| David Ballou | Associate professor of music and coordinator of jazz/commercial music at Towson University, in Towson, Maryland. http://www.daveballou.com/ | Improvisation Ensemble: "This ensemble investigates the various performance practices of improvised music. We will explore the multiple roles a performer assumes during the creation of an improvised performance" (from the course syllabus). |

Sarath walking up the sidewalk, wearing his usual attire: blue jeans, black sneakers, cotton button-down shirt, dark vest, and hat. When he saw us, he smiled and waved

warmly, and we pulled over to offer him a ride. (It was 8:22, and his class was to start at 8:30.) "I've got it timed perfectly he says with a laugh!" I'd known Ed for several years at this point; we formed a relationship through a mutual colleague/friend as well as through meetings at ISIM conferences. Ed has a slight build, intense eyes, and a perpetual smile on his face. This smile, the twinkle in his eyes, and his nonstop energy make Ed come across to me as a young prankster (though I would guess his age to be near 60). He is passionate about and loves to discuss music education, creativity, improvisation, transcendental meditation, contemplative practice, and the combination of all of these topics. When Ed talks, it is an intense, hurried stream of consciousness. He talks quickly and passionately, gestures with his hands, jokes, and laughs, all in a relatively quiet yet intense tone. When he asks questions, he listens to the answer but will come back with more questions. I noticed Ed acted with his ensemble the same as he would if he and I were having a casual conversation on a serious subject: passionately and with humor.

*Pauline Oliveros.* For many years, Pauline Oliveros was just a very famous name to me—somebody I doubted I would ever have a chance to meet or who would ever really care about what I did. This perception changed almost immediately when I met her. She was bundled from head to toe in various colors of Polartec vestments and sturdy winter boots during a wicked snowstorm on a December day at the 2007 ISIM conference at Northwestern University. She and her partner made it through the snowstorm to this conference and were to perform that day on a stage with live avatars beamed in from a virtual place in the Internet. I knew immediately upon meeting her, helping her stow her coat and bags, that this woman was more than extraordinary. She was human. Relatively short with wispy white hair and wire rim glasses, Pauline seems to approach people (and life) free of preconceived notions. Since our first meeting, I have had the pleasure of continued e-mail conversations and of visiting her home in upstate New York, where colorful decorations and pillows and various shapes of furniture (as well as her cat) greet any person who enters. While her biography speaks for itself in regard to her pioneering work in the avant-garde music scene of the 1960s, Pauline has been and continues to be on a lifelong mission to teach people the art of listening.[2] I feel fortunate to now consider Pauline a mentor to me, one who is just a phone call (or Internet chat) away.

*Fred Frith.* I must admit I had not heard of Fred Frith until his name was mentioned as a potential participant for this study. As I began to do some research on Fred, I learned that he not only was a guru who literally transformed the solo electric guitar world but also was influential in the vibrant avant-garde scene in England during the 1960s. I knew Fred only from the photos I had seen on the Internet and so was somewhat nervous about meeting him for the first time in person. I arrived on the Mills College campus several hours before I was to meet with him. The campus is a small, lush, green "island" surrounded by the urban city of Oakland, California. I arrived early and enjoyed walking around the tree-filled campus until I finally settled in at a student coffee/meeting place. A very large man with pepper-gray curly hair walked past me,

chatting with two students, and I knew immediately that this was Fred (perhaps the British accent gave it away). I observed Fred from afar and sensed, based on his casual interaction with the students, that I would enjoy meeting him in person. Upon going to his office for our "official" meeting later in the day, I felt immediately at ease, as I had suspected. Fred greeted me enthusiastically, his dark eyes were friendly, and then he grumbled a bit about the paperwork he had to finish as part of his administrative duties. We went to have coffee in the lounge where I had seen him previously, and he talked long and eagerly about his passion for improvisation and especially its importance in K–12 education.

*Dave Ballou.* I first met Dave Ballou at an ISIM conference in 2009 in Santa Cruz, California. Among all the participants for this study, Dave is closest to my age. I immediately felt a bond with him as we chatted at the Santa Cruz conference, sharing stories about the perils of traversing through academe as relatively young scholars. He is of medium build, seems to be in good physical shape, wears his hair close-cropped, has wire rim glasses, and dresses in simple, casual attire (jeans and a sweater). At the Santa Cruz meeting I was able to hang out with Dave and other of his improvising colleagues during lunch. Here I watched Dave expertly trade jokes of the performance trade with his colleagues as easily as he shared philosophies of improvisation. I felt comfortable at that lunch table, as if I were sitting among my own college buddies. This feeling was no different when we met later at Dave's office on the campus of Towson University, where he (at that time) was seeking tenure and promotion (he subsequently attained both). Dave was eager to talk about his recent past performance career as well as the transformation to academe. Like the others, Dave was passionate about the power and importance of free improvisation and school music.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of semistructured interviews, rehearsal observations, and document analysis. For each case, I interviewed the participant prior to a class or rehearsal and then observed at least one class or rehearsal. The observation was followed by a second interview. I used a semistructured interview protocol to guide the first interview but presented questions that were specific to the observations for follow-up interviews.

In the ensemble settings I observed, I sat in a nonintrusive space (in the back of the hall or off to the side of the ensemble). I audio-recorded the classes or rehearsals (except for Frith's ensemble, at his request) and also wrote detailed field notes. Finally, I collected documents, such as course syllabi, texts, and press material about the artists and their courses/ensembles, for clarification as well as for analysis and data triangulation.

I transcribed and then coded the interviews and rehearsal recordings as well as the field notes using an iterative and open coding process. A second coding of the interview and field notes was conducted and connected to a material data grid to look for connections to the research questions as well as to look for the emergence of major

themes. A final selective coding of the material allowed me to examine each case as an individual case, which I followed with a cross-case comparison in order to find any common pedagogical practices and to align the emergent themes with the research questions. The multiple data sources were triangulated for validation, and the participants were provided with interview transcripts for member checking. (To view materials related to the research procedures, see Figures S1 and S2 available as online supplemental materials at http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental).

## Findings

Several themes emerged that were relevant to the purpose and questions of this study. These were (a) teacher tools, (b) vocabulary, (c) physical teaching space, (d) feedback, (e) leader as guide, (f) comfort with spontaneity, (g) psychological space, and (h) pedagogue as performer. They are organized according to each of the four research questions and are presented in the next section.

### *Research Question 1: Strategies and Approaches*

Four themes emerged related to the strategies and approaches that the pedagogues used in their free-improvisation ensembles. They are teacher tools, a unique vocabulary, physical teaching space, and feedback. Each is detailed in the text that follows.

*Teacher Tools.* Each pedagogue seemed to own a personal set of tools, or "repertoire of techniques" (Frith, 2010), which was used seamlessly to guide the improvisation ensembles during rehearsals. Sometimes these consisted of short exercises or études—that is, relatively specific prompts to get the music going—and, other times, whole plans for how an improvisation might unfold. The tools they used were sometimes in the form of prompts directing either who would play (e.g., challenging two members of the ensemble to perform a duet or taking turns playing solos around the group) or how the ensemble might begin or continue, or a combination of these.

Ed and Dave each shared with me a compilation of their own exercises they had created, collected, and documented over the years. Many of Ed's can be found in his music theory text (Sarath, 2009). Dave's collection is in a continually updated computer document; it is a work in progress that he shares with others who want ideas for leading improvisation ensembles.

In most cases, the rehearsals started with one of the pedagogue's tools, often an exercise or prompt to warm up and get the members playing cohesively. Eventually instructions moved toward developing larger pieces, encouraged often only by words such as "Just play," or "Let's try that again." Many times, the pedagogues would ask the ensemble members to provide the prompt for the ensemble: "What would you like to do next?" was not an uncommon question in each of the classes I visited.

The tools used by the ensemble leaders tended to be more general than they were specific, sometimes offering several options. Following are two examples, one from Ed and the other from Pauline:

> I want to start with this exercise, which is called long tones with a pulse. That means all we do is we play. . . . You can either play silence, or you can play a long tone . . . and just listen . . . and I'm going to give you one sort of creative option. When you come in with your long tone, if you feel like you want to shift to another long tone, you can. Generally when you feel like your pitch is not gelling, you don't like the way the collective sonority is unfolding, generally a half step up or a half step down solves the problem. Generally. (Sarath, ensemble rehearsal instructions)

> Take a moment and create for yourselves a loop. Some material that you can loop, and it can be a short loop or long loop. . . . You keep your loop but you start to incorporate from some other material into your loop so your loop starts to morph a little bit but it's still basically there. And then you continue that until you morph more and more. [pause] So we'll see where it goes. (Oliveros, graduate seminar ensemble instructions)

Ed's background as a jazz musician seemed to shape some of the types of prompts he gave. For instance, he might ask soloists to play against a tonally centered background improvised by the ensemble and would instruct the background players to be cognizant of the soloist. The other pedagogues used tools that were perhaps less "jazz-like" but unique to their experiences in improvisation work.

*A Unique Vocabulary.* Because free improvisation does not necessarily revolve around a tonal center or present clear melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic structures that might be familiar in traditional Western jazz and classical music, the pedagogues needed access to a vocabulary that was as unique as the music itself. Common music terms to which one might be accustomed (e.g., related to melody, rhythm, or harmony) simply would not work and, I observed, were used rarely. The pedagogues were fluent with a vocabulary that spoke to metaphors, density, feeling, texture, energy, and so on. Other words that I noted included *fabric, sonority, intensity, wave*, and *rumble*. There did not seem to be a shared vocabulary among the pedagogues but, rather, words were used that were unique to each person and situation.

Students in the ensembles also seemed fluent with words outside the common vernacular of music terms. After a round of randomly chosen improvisation duets between members of the Mills College improvisation ensemble, the students entered a deep discussion regarding what they played and heard. In my observation notes I wrote,

> Annie and Chris share a really cool conversation. Words that come out: Logic, texture, color, development, and relationships. Another pair use a visual metaphor: "Got to the top of a hill and then simply fell backwards."

This facility with a vocabulary that could speak to the music, yet is different than what one might consider as common music terms, seemed to be an important skill for the pedagogues to provide feedback and inspire dialogue.

*Physical Teaching Space.* The pedagogues set up a space that was physically and psychologically purposeful (I discuss the "psychological space" later). A circular physical

setup was evident in each of the ensembles I observed, and the pedagogue either was part of the circle or sat away as an audience member/spectator. Related to space was ensemble size. It was clear in all instances that this kind of music making is best done in small, chamber-size ensembles. One of the reasons that Ed created a second, prerequisite ensemble for his Creative Arts Orchestra (CAO) was because the CAO was getting too big and unwieldy for the kind of free music improvisation he hoped to perform (he mentioned it had grown to well over 20 members at one time). All of the teachers mentioned that small-size ensembles are better for free improvisation than large. Twelve was the average number of participants in the ensembles I observed. The instrumentation of ensembles did not matter to any of the pedagogues, and it ranged from traditional band and orchestra instruments to varied electronic instruments and voice.

*Feedback.* "One man's junk is another man's treasure" (Ballou, Interview 2). The theme of feedback emerged because of the seeming avoidance of qualitative assessment. What I observed in nearly every circumstance was that when an evaluation seemed warranted, there was a complete avoidance of any words related to *quality* (an exception to this was Ed, who had a talking habit of saying "Good" or "Beautiful" nearly every time the ensemble stopped; it seemed to be more of an unconscious tic or habit than meaning something was literally good). When I mentioned this absence of qualitative adjectives or judgments in rehearsals, each of the pedagogues felt adamant that the free-improvisation ensemble was not the place for judgmental feedback.

Qualitative feedback was viewed as squelching: "If you start criticizing what they're doing, you're going to dry it up pretty fast" (Oliveros, Interview 1). And often this type of evaluation was deemed not possible, given the subjective nature of the art form:

> I think that what sounds good to me might sound terrible to somebody else. And I think that's okay. I think that what improvisation is teaching us is that it's okay for things to be not objectively the same for everybody. (Ballou, Interview 2)

Rather than talk about the quality of a performance, the pedagogues talked objectively, and colorfully, about what happened and how it "felt." This invariably would draw students into rich, analytical conversations. "How did that feel to you?" was a common question asked of ensemble members after they finished a piece. Oliveros liked to speak about the feeling and energy of a performance: "What sensations did you have? Was there some emotion or feeling that comes up? And then . . . try again! How was it energetically, where is the energy of this improvisation?" (Oliveros, Interview 1). Each player's subjective experience as an individual and as an ensemble member seemed more important than how the music sounded on a good/bad continuum.

The ability to offer *constructive* (as opposed to qualitative) feedback and lead critical dialogue about a completed music event was an obvious pedagogue skill. After each music event, the pedagogues skillfully prompted ensemble members to reflect on the experience itself:

> Let's not worry about whether the performance is good or not; let's more focus on how we felt. What kind of interaction was going on and how you think it could have been done differently. Not better, but differently . . . The choices that you make as an improviser are your choices and they may not be to the taste of that teacher, but that doesn't mean to say that they're bad. (Frith, Interview 1)

This skillful ability to dialogue with players constructively after a performance or rehearsal appeared to be second nature to the pedagogues. Sarath dismissed this skill as not special at all but, rather, one that all musicians possess:

> I mean we all know what music sounds like . . . I mean different kinds of music sound differently. But there are certain common elements, and a person with decent musical instincts will be able to hear a free music improvisation and have some constructive things to say. Almost anybody, that is. (Sarath, Interview 1)

Each of the pedagogues had an extraordinary ability to ask thoughtful questions after completion of an exercise or piece. They knew how to probe in an intellectually honest and authentic way and without judgment of quality. Their questions invariably opened up rich discussion among the ensemble members that were skillfully orchestrated by the pedagogues. The questions and probing were spontaneous and always in relation to the music experience.

Despite the seeming avoidance of qualitative feedback in a rehearsal, I did notice that the pedagogues would describe qualities of ensembles they were working with or had worked with in the past. For instance, in our discussion about a rehearsal I was about to observe of Oliveros's graduate improvisation seminar, Pauline noted, "They are a really good group. Today is only the third day and they sound really good already" (Oliveros, Interview 2). Fred and Ed also dropped occasional hints about the overall quality of an ensemble when describing either their own groups over the years or other improvisation groups they knew. It was in the rehearsal itself where this qualitative marker seemed to be completely avoided.

## *Research Question 2: The Perceived Role of the Ensemble Leader*

The pedagogues in each of these cases played roles, and perceived their roles to be, different from what one might consider typical for an ensemble conductor. They all understood their institutional role as the instructor or authority figure for their classes, and their syllabi reflected class expectations, course materials, assignments, and so on. But their actions and perceptions were as ensemble guides and facilitators rather than as leaders or directors.

Dave described his role as a "coach" with his ensemble: "I think of an ensemble coach as somebody who kind of just guides the ensemble to think for itself. . . . The ensemble should be able to function without me being there" (Ballou, Interview 1). Fred felt strongly about his job as ensemble leader: "I refuse to be an authority figure in the traditional sense, because I don't think it actually teaches the students anything beyond a kind of facile imitative gestureability" (Frith, Interview 1). Pauline described herself as one in

> a community of artists working together. And I'm one who has quite a bit more experience than all of them, but I'm there to share it and also to support them in what they're doing and try to point them to materials that support what their work is, as well as materials that support the concerns and interests that I have. (Oliveros, Interview 1)

The pedagogues' perceptions of their roles as facilitators rather than directors were evident as I watched their interactions during rehearsals. I never observed the pedagogues actually conduct the ensembles. They neither started nor stopped the music pieces. Music began, perhaps after agreement with the ensemble of a prompt or strategy, and always just naturally ended without any prompt—sometimes 20 min after starting.

## *Research Question 3: Pedagogue Dispositions*

Two dispositions emerged from the data that were common among the pedagogues. One was comfort with spontaneity and the other was sensitivity to the psychological space of the ensemble.

*Spontaneity.* The pedagogues approached their ensemble rehearsals without a clear plan. They might have had a sketch or rough idea of what they wanted to try but seemed perfectly content with the idea that the class might go in a direction they had not envisioned. Fred and Ed talked explicitly about a lack of planning for their rehearsals. Ed mentioned that when he planned carefully, his rehearsals were a disaster. He stressed the importance of spontaneity:

> No matter how systematic the materials are—things we can plan out or write down—the spontaneity of the teacher, which we know is always important, no matter what you're doing, in this kind of teaching is . . . off the scale. (Sarath, Interview 1)

Fred noted, "There's no such thing as a typical class, which is frustrating to some students because they want to have a very strong framework. And I resist that" (Frith, Interview 1). When I asked Fred about the rehearsal I was to observe that evening, he thought he might continue on an exercise he began last week or "then, probably, I don't really know yet, I work very much in the moment of what seems to be in the air" (Frith, Interview 1). As mentioned above, Dave was beginning to collect and share a list of exercises that he had used successfully in his ensemble classes. His description of these exercises highlights his disposition toward spontaneity: "I was trying to document these exercises that I was really just making up on the fly" (Ballou, Interview 2).

The pedagogues were comfortable being flexible and spontaneous, and confident that the rehearsals would unfold successfully despite not having a clear plan. In this sense, they were improvisers not only as players but also as teachers.

*Ensemble Psychological Space.* The psychological space seemed as important as, if not more important than, the physical ensemble setup. What struck me most as I sat in the classrooms or performance spaces was the feeling of complete psychological safety and comfort. It was important to all four pedagogues that a sense of community

developed in their ensembles and that trust permeated the rehearsal. Sensitivity to trust and community, and their seeming in-the-moment empathy toward students' feelings and susceptibilities, was common among them. The pedagogues recognized improvisation as a potentially vulnerable act: "It's a pretty intimate conversation . . . I mean we're asking people to be honest and genuine and there's very little time in people's lives where they're asked to do that" (Ballou, Interview 2).

When Fred and I were trying to pick a date for my visit, the last class meeting of the semester would not work:

> Our final concert is the week before, and on the [date I might visit] we sit down and discuss that and the semester's work together using journals as resources. And I don't think that would be possible for an outsider to observe—too intimate when you haven't been a part of the process. (Frith, e-mail correspondence)

Pauline linked assessment to psychological safety in describing the kind of space she works to create: "a very safe place to experiment and discover—a place of discovery" (Oliveros, Interview 1).

All four pedagogues demonstrated an awareness of the "intimacy" of improvisation within an ensemble and were careful to provide an environment where psychological comfort was central.

### *Research Question 4: Other Attributes of Pedagogues*

The four pedagogues shared a common background as active professional performers and improvisers. Not only do they continue to perform as professionals, but they also occasionally perform in their ensembles during the rehearsals. In Pauline's case, she also performed on the concerts with her graduate seminar students. They are all facile technicians on their instruments and noted the importance of this for successful free improvisation. "I try to get as technically adept on the instrument as I can so that I can choose to play or not play" (Ballou, Interview 2). Fred said, "Technique at its most basic is the ability to do what you want when you want to do it," and "the deployment of technique [is] the understanding of how your ability to do that interfaces with other people's doing what they do" (Frith, Interview 1).

That they were each active and outstanding performers in their own right allowed them to model, when necessary, free improvisation for their students. In addition, their identity as equal performer and member of the ensemble at times seemed important toward supporting the trust and egalitarian nature of the ensemble.

## Discussion

The findings from this study of collegiate free-improvisation pedagogues align with those of recent research on non-genre-specific improvisation in K–12 settings. They also present implications for music teacher education. While studies by Koutsoupidou and Hargreaves (2009) and Moreira and Carvalho (2010) point to the potential outcomes of

free improvisation for school-age children (increased creativity, improved technical skills), those by others (Burnard, 2002; Kanellopoulos, 1999; Lange, 2011; Lewandowski, 2010; Moorhead & Pond, 1978) as well as findings from the present study highlight the efficacy and transformative potential of this egalitarian ensemble experience.

The findings of avoidance of preconceived notions of quality, the building of trust among ensemble members, and the teacher as guide rather than director resonated with those reviewed here. Kanelloupous (1999) discovered that community building was one of the highlights for students involved in an improvisation ensemble. Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) found this kind of music making supports the tenets of assessment in informal learning: "In improvisation students began to experience the issue of how to judge difference without having to regress to ready made criteria" (p. 77). The findings and emergent themes from this study also align with Stenström's (2009) comprehensive analysis of literature on free improvisation. He found a lack of qualitative evaluation, spiritual aspects, importance of technical (instrument) and listening skills, and "non-invasive" (Stenström, 2009, p. 51) directing.

Despite a potential "anything-goes" notion of free improvisation, it is clear from this study that both the students and instructors who enjoyed their success in the collegiate ensembles had acquired advanced technical skills on their instruments. They were able to express their musical selves in the moment using the technical and aural skills they had honed up to this point. As informal-learning researchers have learned, simple technical skills on an instrument are prerequisite to success at playing music by ear (Green, 2008). Interestingly, the

> concept of technique as a *conscious* aspect of controlling the instrument or voice comes late to most popular musicians, and is in many cases incorporated into their activities either immediately before or some time after becoming professional. However, having taught themselves to play their instruments or sing in their own ways, the adoption of standard techniques at a late stage comes with surprising ease. (Green, 2008, p. 8)

The technical and aural skill of being able to state musically on an instrument or voice that which is intended is one that needs to be strengthened in traditional K–12 music education, where current emphasis tends to be on note reading. And this technical and aural learning can and should be situated within ensemble growth (Borgo, 2007). This raises the question of how free improvisation might be facilitated in beginner ensembles, where student technical skills are only beginning to develop.

Perhaps the greatest implication from this study lies within music teacher education. "Improvisation allows for a direct confrontation of learning as a search for self-transformation. Learning how to build our relationships with children and music: this is maybe the most fundamental value of learning through improvisation" (Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010, p. 82). Wright and Kanellopoulos (2010) found that the preservice teachers in their study not only gained valuable improvisatory skills from the experience but also came to realize the "rut" they had developed: "One of the most persistent points which was raised by the students was the shortcomings of dominant formal music education training approaches to which they had been subjected" (p. 78).

The shortcomings included the lack of freedom of expression, focus on note reading, and anxiety-inducing improvisation experiences.

How might the findings from the present and reviewed studies help teachers become more comfortable facilitating free-improvisation learning (or any informal-learning pedagogy) into their classrooms? The obvious answer is to provide spaces for preservice music teachers to experiment with, and experience, this kind of music making. Borrowing the "teacher tools" from pedagogues like those studied here and through the work of Green (2002, 2008) and others who have studied informal-learning pedagogies (e.g., Folkestad, 2006; Jaffurs, 2004, 2006; Waldron, 2009) may help those in preservice music teacher settings scaffold these experiences. While some of the features of free-improvisation ensembles likely would present logistical barriers that require further consideration (such as the implications for grading), others offer immediate tools for facilitating more democratic learning processes in any ensemble (such as encouraging discussion and input from ensemble members). Preservice teachers need practice providing nonqualitative feedback and stimulating rich discussion among ensemble members.

The facility that the pedagogues (and their students) had with a type of vocabulary not traditionally used in formal music education also might impact how educators teach the vocabulary of music. Cutietta (1993) challenges music educators to think beyond the music elements and to think more metaphorically about the sounds students try to describe when talking about music. Music teacher educators may want to begin to analyze the assumptions that are made about the terms and vocabulary used in music listening and performing spaces.

However, as Lange (2011) found, even the most well-intentioned teacher, if brought up in the conservatory style, may have trouble letting go of some of the ingrained teacher-directed models of ensemble learning. Until free-improvisation-like ensemble experiences become accepted and perpetuated in K–12 school *and* university settings, it may be a long and difficult road before they impact teacher education.

More research is needed not only from the perspective of teachers in K–12 settings but also from those involved with preservice music teacher education. For instance, the pedagogues in this study were improvisers as teachers. How does one develop (or teach) the skill to teach spontaneously? Improvised teaching appears counterintuitive to the sequence-driven and carefully prescribed lesson plans often required from students in teacher education programs. Critical analyses of teaching free improvisation, such as demonstrated in Schlict's (2007) self-analysis of teaching her first free-improvisation course, may provide examples.

While the pedagogues in this study preferred ensembles of fewer than 20 members (and this is true of many of the ensembles examined in informal-learning pedagogy), the formation of ensembles smaller than the typical large school bands, orchestras, and choirs in public school music programs might prove impractical. How does one facilitate free-improvisation experiences for students in very large ensembles? This will require further study in order to implement this kind of music making in school music ensemble programs.

How does one distinguish between a good free-improvisation ensemble and one that is not? I speculate that the pedagogues I studied would argue that this question is

not important when it comes to free-improvisation ensembles. However, the reality and importance of evaluation and assessment in school settings cannot be overlooked in music teacher education. Further research about quality and assessment, and even development, of free-improvisation ensembles is needed in order to help inform pre-service and in-service teachers who wish to implement these ensembles within the structures of formal schooling.

I examined free-improvisation pedagogy from the perspective of the instructors. Authors of future research might examine the experience from the perspective of the ensemble members. The student musicians were obviously comfortable in these ensembles, seemed to enjoy the experience, and were skilled in adding to the rich dialogue and feedback concerning their music experiences. Which teachers and teaching methods would these ensemble members credit for the development of their skills? Do those who elect to participate in these ensembles have particular personality traits that draw them to these experiences? These and other questions related to the experience of, and perspectives from, ensemble members warrant further study.

With the recent trend toward imagining new, more innovative approaches to ensemble instruction in schools, such as through informal learning methods, free-improvisation ensembles offer a potential vehicle toward more creative and egalitarian music making. Christopher Small's (1998) concept of "musicking," in which music making is not necessarily about the product, but about the joyous occasion of the process and the relationships that music making brings, resonates with these pedagogues' approaches to free-improvisation ensembles. Small explained, "We learn, from the sounds and from one another, the nature of the relationships; in affirming we teach one another about the relationships; and in celebrating we bring together the teaching and the learning in an act of social solidarity" (Small, 1998, p. 218). This description aptly sums up the common ways in which Fred Frith, Ed Sarath, Pauline Oliveros, and David Ballou successfully negotiated their own free-improvisation ensembles. I hope that by learning a little from these successful improvisers, we can advance this notion into the experiences of our future music teachers and music teacher educators.

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## Notes

1. The Afrocentric-versus-Eurocentric debate of its origin is still contested and written about elsewhere. See, for example, Lewis (2004) and Monson (2007).
2. See the Deep Listening Institute website (http://deeplistening.org/) to learn more about this effort.

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental Figures S1 and S2 are available at http://jrme.sagepub.com/supplemental.

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