



PTAS Project Report (for REGULAR PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: Musical improvisation in Higher Education: Values, methods and assessment"

Project type (delete as appropriate) :

A Research Project (research focus on particular dimension of teaching, learning, assessment)

Principal Investigator : Raymond MacDonald

Schools/department : Music

Team members (including Schools and Departments) :

Graeme Wilson and Zack Moir (both Music)

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Report (maximum 1500 words)

What did you do?

The study included interviews with individual responsible for the design and delivery of jazz courses at each HE institution offering education in this subject area in Scotland. Four prominent higher education (HE) music educators (jazz specialists) were interviewed on the subject of teaching musical improvisation within their respective courses. The interviewed were transcribed and analysed and key themes were developed.

What did you find out?

Educators generally defined improvisation as a musical process or practice that happens 'in the moment' and 'without prior planning'. However, when asked about the way in which improvisation is assessed in their respective courses, each educator described a recital-style exam in which a panel of staff members would grade the students' performances thus essentially considering and evaluating a product. Participants suggest that the music (in the context of improvised performance) is a 'blank page' to be 'filled in', somehow, although the means by which one may do so may be unplanned and, as such, unknown or unknowable. This study has highlighted a particularly interesting disconnect between the participants' conceptions of improvisation in general terms and their pedagogy in this area. Technique for teaching and assessing were discussed and strengths and weaknesses of current approaches were also highlighted.



How did you disseminate your findings?

We have disseminated our findings in a number of ways:

The findings were incorporated into a series of conference papers and key note lectures given by all three team members. Most notable was a recent week long public engagement project at the Tate Gallery in Liverpool where two of the team (MacDonald and Wilson) presented a series of public workshop aimed at engaging the public in cross disciplinary activities.

More information at

<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/performance/exchanges-through-improvisation>

What have been the benefits to student learning?

The results of this project directly influenced the development, design and delivery of a new course called *Improvisation as Social Process* which ran for the first time in Semester 1 2016. This course introduces students to the broad field of practice represented by contemporary group improvised music, allowing students to develop knowledge, experience and critical orientation towards this unique form of collaborative creativity. Topics covered in the weekly seminars included: What is improvisation? Understanding improvisation as a unique, social, collaborative and universal form of creativity; Psychological models of improvisation; Improvisation as real-time composition; Graphic scores; Constrained improvisation; Text-based approaches to improvisation; Distributed creativity; Improvisation as means of fostering. The interviews and insights of the expert educators interviewed in this project were invaluable in the creation and delivery of this course which ran very successfully with excellent student feedback.

How could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

Access to the above course will now be open to all students from across the University. This project helped us identify that not only is improvisation a key element of many musical traditions and but, from a broader perspective, can also be viewed as fundamental to social interactions. In a recent sea change across contemporary art, popular music and other performance disciplines, improvising has become central to a new creative practice that goes beyond genres and across disciplines. Distinct courses of study in institutions of higher education across the world now emphasise improvisation as an activity that can foster collaboration and group creativity across genre boundaries and yet popular and scholarly understandings of how we are able to improvise typically remain focused on the output of prodigious individual jazz musicians within a narrow spectrum of the jazz idiom. The course (which the project directly influenced) sets out a framework, based on psychological findings, for understanding improvisation as a universal capability and an essentially social behaviour, with important implications for contemporary artistic practices, pedagogy, music therapy and the psychology of social behaviour.



Financial statement (please delete as appropriate):

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:

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