

## MENC: The National Association for Music Education

---

An Ethnography of Improvisation Training in a Music Methods Course

Author(s): Christopher J. Della Pietra and Patricia Shehan Campbell

Source: *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), pp. 112-126

Published by: MENC: The National Association for Music Education

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3345673>

Accessed: 24/02/2009 09:48

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=menc>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



MENC: The National Association for Music Education is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Research in Music Education*.

*In the belief that the strengthening of secondary school music programs is at least partially linked to the training of prospective teachers in the techniques of improvisation, we have examined the process by which music education students reveal an understanding of improvisation, its relationship to analytical listening, the musical and social interactions that can result from its study and practice in a group setting, and ways to integrate it into the curriculum. A 5-week improvisation training segment was included in a secondary music methods course. Five 90-minute sessions were focused on listening and analyzing model pieces and consequent small-group improvisations "in the style of the model." Data were analyzed using ethnographic techniques. The profiles of two students were developed to trace emerging thoughts and behaviors regarding improvisation training. Although the profiled students differed as to prior experiences and personal perspectives on music-making and teaching, both showed evidence of an evolving sensitivity to the process of improvisation due to instruction—for themselves and for their students.*

**Christopher J. Della Pietra**  
**Patricia Shehan Campbell**  
*University of Washington*

## An Ethnography of Improvisation Training in a Music Methods Course

In the quest to develop school music programs that are responsive to the adage "Music for every child, every child for music," music educators are becoming increasingly aware of the need for broader and more inclusive curricular offerings at all levels (see the *National Standards for Arts Education*, 1994). In particular, the participation of secondary school students in music courses continues to decline at an alarming rate (Gates, 1989; NASSP, 1994), particularly in urban settings, where curricular offerings in middle, junior high, and high schools do not attract students whose musical needs and interests lie elsewhere than within traditional choral and instrumental ensembles (Fowler, 1991).

If all human beings have a need for aesthetic expression through

experiences in music and the arts (Blacking, 1973; Gaston, 1968), then secondary school music programs should provide suitable settings for the engagement of students in a wide array of instructional experiences through which such musical expression can be realized. In addition to the more traditional re-creative solo and ensemble opportunities that exist, providing occasions for creative musical experiences, particularly through improvisation, may be key to attracting a greater number of students from a broader representation of the population at large. For students in pre-notational stages, improvisation may afford opportunities to sustain interest and enjoyment while challenging them to order their musical thinking. Improvisation is playful, and it also integrates the development of analytical listening and performance skills, which may later motivate the development of notational literacy (Campbell, 1991).

Constructivist perspectives underscore the importance of play as “serious business” in the learning and development of children and young people (Vygotsky, 1978); thus, improvisation allows understanding and knowledge to be extended by students through their musical play. Constructivism is concerned with how knowledge is constructed, or assembled and configured, from the individual’s experiences, mental structures, and beliefs (Jonassen, 1991; Perkins, 1991). When improvisation is viewed within a constructivist framework, an original musical expression is one (of many) interpretations of events, objects, and feelings within the learner’s experience. But improvisation is hardly an idle dabbling; it is instead a conscious effort to filter musical input and to form new and meaningful musical configurations. For some secondary school students, opportunities to engage in improvisation (particularly within rhythmic percussion ensembles) may not only appeal to their musical interests, but also serve to enhance their understanding of music’s sonic structures.

Another long-standing and commonsensical adage is that “teachers teach as they have been taught” (Grossman, 1990). Music teacher educators and faculty in collegiate units of music at large are questioning their connections to the professional lives to which their students will graduate. An examination of public schools, their students, and the rapid societal changes that shape them sends clear signals to teacher educators that traditional teacher preparation must change. Although performance and theoretical and historical knowledge have been emphasized in collegiate music programs, only recently have programs begun to require studies in technology and world musics. Minimal attention has been given to improvisation training in policy statements, with no procedural details provided (NASM, 1993).

Teachers are often living two lives: that of their collegiate programs and that of the “real world” of the public schools from which they have come and to which they will return. Students who seek knowledge of music and teaching through collegiate programs should be assured that their training will lead to competence as performers, analytical listeners, and improvisers and composers of mul-

tiple styles of art, traditional, and popular music. It is only then that they will "teach as they have been taught," in ways that will influence students in the schools of an increasingly complex and culturally diverse society.

Improvisation has been defined in various ways. It is the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed (Sadie, 1980). It spans a spectrum, from immediate composition by performers, to the elaboration of an existing framework. It may be new—distinct from any earlier work—or it may be a reworking of a remembered work, settling well within the stylistic boundaries of that work. Viewed more liberally, improvisation may be involved in the realm of the pianist's musical interpretation of a Beethoven sonata (Nettl, 1974), as musicians make subjective decisions about tempo, dynamics, and even ornamentation. It emanates from earlier sound and/or performance experiences, and although it may seem to be spontaneous, "improvisation is model-bound" such that "component units—building blocks, stock phrases, and formulaic patterns—of a model piece" are typically combined, recombined, and rearranged (Nettl, 1974, p. 13). Nettl (1974) observed that the degree to which improvisation is formally learned may also spread across a continuum, from informal listening and trial-and-error participation to carefully controlled lessons in the imitation of particular "component units" (p. 15).

As used within the context of this research, improvisation is the process of collaboratively inventing a musical piece in the style of a given model. This definition is in compliance with the one that is advanced by the Comprehensive Musicianship program (Willoughby, 1982; Woods, 1986), in which the process of creating new musical expressions based on familiar structures is a principal means of developing independent musicianship. The improvisation training central to the research undertaken here included directed analytical listening and the imitation of selected patterns and phrases deemed characteristic of the model pieces.

If teacher educators accept the idea that improvisation is a means of musical knowing (Elliott, 1990; Stublely, 1992), that improvisation is attractive to public school students who might not otherwise be drawn to school music programs, and that experiences in improvisation can be directed only by those who themselves are proficient at improvising music, then it would follow that improvisation training should be included within the music teacher education program. Jazz techniques courses do not directly fill the need, nor does participation in instrumental or vocal jazz ensembles. Prospective teachers, as well as in-service teachers who seek training, may be best served through participation in experiences most similar to those they will teach, direct, or facilitate within the schools (Grossman, 1990). Thus, if teachers are to develop and lead improvisation ensembles of percussion instruments for a broader population of secondary school students, their training must include these experiences.

## PURPOSE

An ethnographic study was launched in the belief that the strengthening of secondary school music programs is at least partially linked to the training of prospective teachers in the techniques of improvisation. Students in a secondary school music methods course constituted a "culture," defined by Harris (1968) as "the sum of a social group's observable patterns of behavior, customs, and way of life" (p. 16), that is, a group of people united by commonly held beliefs and behaviors (Kingsbury, 1988). These methods course students were, in fact, viewed as a subculture within the larger scope of a music teacher education culture. The purpose of this study was to examine the process by which music education students reveal as musicians and as teachers an understanding of improvisation, its relationship to analytical listening, its dual nature in terms of musical and social interactions, and ways to integrate it into the curriculum.

Information was sought regarding the qualifications, or enabling features, of music education students (a) to understand the inherent structure of rhythmic percussion pieces from various world cultures, (b) to play with characteristic musical features that include duration, timbre, and intensity, (c) to hear the pulse, subdivisions, large structures, and micropatterns that make up model musical pieces and to emulate these components in improvised music, (d) to recognize the socialization processes of improvising within a group and the leader and follower roles that are taken, and (e) to determine the communication channels by which musicians and teachers can shape group improvisation. The musical-analytical skills of musically trained teachers were thus examined, along with the interactive nature of improvisation as it relates to social-constructivist views of learning (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Consistent with Vygotsky's premise that "human learning (at all ages/stages) presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (p. 129), an examination was undertaken to note student collaboration and the resultant learning that occurs through interaction with others within their environment, that is, their small collegial group.

## METHOD

Two music education students, members of a methods course that included five undergraduates and three certification-only or special-status students, served as informants for the study. Both informants, as well as the remaining six students within the course, had completed prerequisite courses in theory and aural skills and music history, and all eight had at least 3 years of applied and choral and/or instrumental ensemble experience. Their selection as informants was based upon their ability to articulate their thoughts re-

garding improvisation and its pedagogy, as opposed to the limited information provided by the less voluble students in the class. Although one informant had taught music for 2 years, she was observed to be as similarly naive as the other informant in matters of improvisation, and was thus deemed a beginning student of improvisation. In addition, her only previous formal course work in teaching music at the secondary level was a choral curriculum class. The 5-week improvisation training was included in a required 10-week course in secondary music methods. Because the purpose of the study was intentionally exploratory of the process by which music education students develop understanding of musical and pedagogical problems inherent in improvisation, a qualitative paradigm was deemed appropriate. Since the culture of music education students (particularly those enrolled in this secondary music methods course) was the orienting concept of the research, ethnography was the specific approach taken.

Following readings and discussion that set the rationale for the design of improvisation ensembles in the secondary schools, five 90-minute sessions were dedicated to the listening to and analysis of model pieces and improvisation “in the style of the model.” The five models were 2-minute excerpts from rhythmic percussion ensembles of Ghana, the Bahamas, China, Vietnam, and Brazil; ensemble instruments included various types of drums, rattles, bells, gongs, and wood blocks, sticks, and claves. Each session began with a 25-minute aural analysis of a targeted model piece, which proceeded through three listening-and-discussion sequences. By the third listening experience of the sequence, students were expected to be able to play—on desks, laps, floor, or other surfaces—several of the key rhythmic patterns that constituted the musical whole. When incorrect or insufficient patterns were extracted by students for performance, the course professor and teaching assistant, who were also the investigators of the study, demonstrated them for immediate student imitation and rehearsal. This use of imitation as an instructional technique parallels its use in an array of world music cultures, including Indian, Persian, Khmer, Japanese *matsuri*, and Thai (Campbell, 1991; Nettl, 1974).

The aural analysis unit was followed by small-group improvisation. Four students were randomly assigned to each of two groups; the membership in these groups did not vary over the 5 weeks. The students were presented with classroom instruments similar to those of the model piece, and directed to two different rooms to “invent a musical piece in the style of the model.” The task was further explained as a musical and pedagogical exercise, in which students could choose to proceed spontaneously or deliberately, verbally or nonverbally, as musicians and as teachers, in playing with possibilities for creating a new piece springing from the structural features and patterns of the model. Following a 20-minute workout improvisation session, students returned to the classroom and were asked to play their musical invention for the other group.

Data were collected through prestudy and poststudy inventories and verbal protocols (or “think-alouds,” a strategy by which stream-of-consciousness ideas by informants on various topics are solicited), videotapes and audiotapes of weekly small-group work sessions and in-class performances, and weekly written “reactions.” Analysis of data, including complete verbal and musical transcriptions of the 10 videotapes, involved the use of ethnographic techniques espoused by Spradley and McCurdy (1972), Taft (1988), and Hammersly (1992), which were further modified for specific use in educational settings by Grossman (1990) and Wolcott (1990). Even though data on all eight students were collected, analysis was concentrated on the responses of the two selected informants. Careful coding of the data into key-word categories by the investigators led to content summaries of student thoughts and behaviors regarding improvisation and its pedagogy, with interrater agreement at 90% for the coding.

The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, was applied in the analysis of the data in an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Two types of triangulation were used: data triangulation, in which the four sources of data from each informant were studied, and investigator triangulation, in which the evaluative comments of two different examiners of the data were analyzed. Thus, informants’ responses and behaviors in inventories, “reaction” papers, verbal protocols, and videotaped workout sessions and in-class performances, as well as the two sets of examiner evaluations, were compared in an attempt to ascertain emergent patterns of thought and action. Beginning with undifferentiated ideas, discernible themes were identified, compared across data sources and investigator evaluations, and verified through multiple occurrences.

## INTERPRETATIONS

A diversity of musical and social behaviors was demonstrated by the informants in their improvisation group’s workout sessions. The two informants, Lisa and Paula, are profiled here and compared and contrasted for their approaches and attitudes toward improvisation before, during, and at the close of instruction. Their perceived roles within their group, their analysis of their group’s resultant improvised piece, and their views on instructional approaches to improvisation for secondary school students are summarized in the following pages. Their own commentaries, both formally given in inventories and reaction papers and on videotapes documenting their engagement in the improvisational process, are representative of the development by all students of the musical and pedagogical thinking that occurred within the course of the instructional period. Still, variations exist of musical and pedagogical thinking, and these are exemplified in the expressed thoughts and behaviors of Lisa and Paula.

### Profiles and Progress

Lisa is a 21-year-old vocal/choral music education major. She is judged by her studio teachers as a gifted musician, singer, and pianist. Her interests in choral education have compelled her to pursue conducting skills beyond the undergraduate 3-term sequence, so that she was also enrolled in the graduate conducting sequence by permission of the instructor during the period of the investigation. A product of 12 years of a historically strong school music curriculum, Lisa surpassed all others in junior-year music education/musician-ship auditions. She pursued music as her major because she "loves music," and she chose to study music education because she believes in the importance of "a strong musical foundation, similar to the kind I had" for all students.

Paula is 24 years old and a special-status student of music education who received her undergraduate training in a moderate-sized, church-affiliated college. Her former instructors commended her for her excellence in academic course work in music history and theory, for her logic, and for her "passionate commitment" to music education. She taught choral/vocal music for 2 years in a middle school before returning to the university for further study toward an eventual master of arts degree. On entrance, she was advised to enroll in a musicianship course so that her aural skills could be further refined; she did well in the course. Paula's postbaccalaureate work in music education and choral courses has exceeded the work of other students at a similar period of professional development. Other students in the class were aware of Paula's past teaching experience and occasionally looked to her for advice on problems that emerged in class discussions.

In the inventory of knowledge about improvisation preceding instruction, Lisa claimed some experience as an improvising musician, although mostly "in private" on the piano. She noted occasions during which she would "dink around" with various other instruments. She raised a curious issue, commenting that she had had little improvisation experience because "my training has led to my pride in being able to read music well. ... In Western performance, we develop techniques to better perform written music and to interpret that music." In numerous ways, Lisa suggested that improvisation involves freedom, using phrases like "letting go," "releasing inhibitions," "spontaneity," and learning to "relax musically." Her outline for teaching improvisation at the start of the experience advised the need for getting students to relax, to create short expressive vocal sounds, and to extend the sounds into phrases and pieces.

During the improvisation sessions, Lisa perceived her role as usually one who "counterpointed" the musical sounds of others in the group. She noted that "people had basic ideas of what they wanted the piece to sound like, so I tried to supplement them musically." She remarked that during the group sessions, she sometimes made suggestions as to which timbre or pattern could plausibly be sound-

ed next. Transcripts of the improvisation sessions show Lisa playing more than talking, sampling one phrase, then another, often while other group members conversed about the overall structure that they wanted the improvisation to take. Lisa's verbal comments are highly seasoned with fragments of rhythmic chant and are interspersed with "like this" and "like that" remarks that precede the music she plays. Her onomatopoeic phrases illustrate her close association with the musical sound, with comments like "Go 'Bum bum bum BOOM'" and "'Ding-ding' it."

In an analysis of her group's improvisations, Lisa explained the group's approach as one of experimentation and exploration in the first two sessions and then of "hooking the beat," "doing patterns" that fit the style of the model, and "finding the groove" in the collective rhythm. In response to a question about what the group might have done differently, she noted at the close of the first session the need to "go wild" and "explore more," whereas by the last two sessions, she recommended a "more continuous flow of the music" and "repeating and extending the patterns" as critical to the process and resultant product. Lisa seemed to be slowly but surely transforming her perception of improvisation from an initial one of spontaneous musical utterance to a later one of a process requiring concrete musical structure to anchor any freedom of expression.

A watershed "Aha" experience occurred in the last improvisation session for Lisa, when she discovered a technique for playing the large tambourine that not only brought cohesion to the group's piece for its timbral effect, but great excitement to her as well. She commented, "That was funky. I just remembered that I was resting my arm on it [the tambourine]. Wait a minute! It's a different pitch... You guys, whatever you were doing in the middle of it [the improvisation], that was really good—just keep playing more. I'm getting soft, and then I'll come back loud again." The resultant piece that stemmed from Lisa's discovery and directions was judged by all class members as the best of the 10 improvised pieces across the five sessions for its timbral and rhythmic interest. Figure 1 presents the transcription of rhythmic patterns from a segment of one of the model pieces, "Cruzado y Bossa Nova." When compared with Figure 2, a transcribed segment of rhythmic patterns from students' improvisation on this model, Lisa's pattern is notable as the one most consistent with the model piece. The meaningfulness of her performance of the model's prominent first pattern is magnified when coupled with her close approximation of the appropriate timbral quality.

By the third of the five sessions, Lisa's comments had taken a different tact than in the first two: she began to react to the selection of the model pieces for use with young students for reasons of musical structure ("clear beat," "four-beat pattern," and "easy structure") rather than for the more vague reasons regarding the "catchy" and "feel-good" merits, her comments on the earlier models. In defining improvisation at the close of the instructional period, Lisa called it

Feeling of 2      ♩ = 192



Figure 1. Transcription of rhythmic patterns from a segment of “Cruzado y Bossa Nova” (10 seconds from beginning).

♩ = 208



Figure 2. Transcription of rhythmic patterns from students' improvisation (20 seconds from beginning).

“composition (not on paper),” attributing successful improvisation to the teacher’s ability to provide students with “sounds to imitate, to work off of, to develop.” Her recommendations for teaching improvisation outlined the following process: (1) define improvisation, (2) lead students to “listening to examples ... from many styles” while drawing students’ attention to pulse and patterns, and (3) lead stu-

dents to improvise over a steady rhythmic pattern, exploring “accents, dynamics, [and] ways to alter a simple pattern.” In essence, about midway through the sessions, Lisa had begun to develop a pedagogical perspective toward improvisation that showed her recognition of the importance of musical structure, the teacher’s role as facilitator, and other key components in building improvisational skills—the choice of model, the need for listening, and the anchoring of improvisation in imitative patterns.

Paula consistently referred to her limited experience with improvisation in the preinstruction inventory, mentioning some “jazz/scat” work in a collegiate vocal ensemble as the only occasional experience in her past. She commented that neither she nor teachers she knew “are comfortable teaching improvisation” nor are students able to improvise “unless they have an aptitude to do so.” Several of Paula’s comments were directed at the importance of developing improvisational skills for herself and for her students, and she said that even though she was “intimidated [to perform] without notation,” she had recently decided she “would force [herself] to do improvisation” in the future. She remarked that in teaching students to improvise, she would use imitative “question-and-answer experiences, play Jamey Abersold tapes,” and, more generally, use jazz as the springboard to improvisation.

Paula described her role within the group improvisation sessions as one of a leader, as she was “the one who supplied the steady beat” for the various patterns the group explored. She remarked that in two sessions, she deliberately attempted to follow the lead of other members of the group, so conscious was she that she might otherwise dominate the group’s session work in her role as leader. Transcriptions of the videotape document her leadership role; out of the 34 comments she made in the first group session, 16 illustrated not only leadership but teaching qualities as well. Questions like “Should we count measures or something?” and “Should we change to a new pattern?” and imperative remarks like “We need to practice an ending” and “Just think up a pattern” were representative of much of her commentary. Along with her questions, Paula’s colloquial expressions may have also softened an otherwise authoritarian role, when she colored her comments with remarks like “Let’s be wacky,” “We screwed up,” or “This is so lame.” In addition, she was often highly approving of the efforts of group members, scattering these expressions throughout the sessions: “That’s good,” “Okay,” “Yeah,” and “Yes!”

Paula described her group’s improvisation throughout the five sessions as part exploratory (in their search for structure) and then as an effort to “stay together.” She noted their repeated attempts to practice “coming in,” to “work off one pattern,” and to achieve a collective control of the improvisation through eye contact, instrumental cues, and a prior decision to stay within a strict form. The videotape transcriptions reveal her concern for the unified ensemble, through comments like “I should count out loud for one measure”

and “Let’s keep doing it over and over a lot of times.” In four of the five sessions, she was the group member asking the others to consider closure for the piece, as in session three: “How are we going to stop?” We can’t say ‘everybody stop.’” She was critical of each improvised piece and suggested specific changes to improve its musical cohesiveness, from providing dynamic intensity, to layering each group member’s part differently, to “not rushing” in one piece, while “keep(ing) it moving” in another piece. Paula was proving an invaluable member of the group as its “musical conscience,” so that despite her self-reported uncertainty as to how to improvise, she was applying the rules of musical structure to the process.

In her remarks on the model pieces that launched each improvisation session, Paula noted that each one was likely to be useful, for different reasons—because one contained “good referential patterns,” another was “easy to follow,” and another could be easily modified. Her 2 years of teaching experience may have allowed her an advantage over the others, who could not yet determine the full practical extent of the models. Following the 5 weeks of instruction, Paula defined improvisation as it had been conceived and realized within the course, as “a creative process that is usually based on a previously conceived structure or form.” She commented that while “getting started [in improvising] is difficult and uncomfortable, the more experience [one has] with it, the more comfortable it is.” Although somewhat more tentative than others, Paula was hopeful of her own development as an improvising musician: “I can improvise. It is a skill that can be built.”

Paula’s recommendations for teaching were sequentially the same as those steps illustrated in class: (1) listen to the model, (2) teach specific rhythm patterns, (3) perform rhythms on instruments, and create a composition in the style [of the model], and (4) create a new style and form. Even though she had targeted jazz as the single style for leading students to improvise prior to instruction, at the close of the period she advised the use of “as many models as possible: contemporary, popular, and multicultural.” She underscored the pedagogical importance of providing “building blocks” for improvisation to students, and she reiterated the importance of listening, emulating the model, and allowing time for practice. Paula’s understanding of both musical and pedagogical structure was demonstrated throughout the sessions and was clarified in the postinstruction inventory.

### **Parallels and Polarities**

The profiles of Lisa and Paula offer more parallel points, than points of contrast, regarding the experience of their own improvisation training within a music methods course. Both contributed substantially to the group improvisation sessions, helping to shape each improvised piece through musical suggestions, questions, approval, and critical remarks. They were socially interactive within their group

in ways that suited their own personal style: Lisa was inclined to interperse her comments with musical fragments, and Paula used a variety of verbal interactions. Neither was naive about musical style or structure, and both were able as knowledgeable musicians to shift from exploratory music making to patterns and phrases that were stylistically appropriate spin-offs of the model. In a Vygotskian manner (1978), their social interactions with others (some less sharpened in their musical or leadership skills than others) were essential ingredients in their process of improvising and in learning a pedagogical sequence for the infusion of improvisation in secondary school programs. Both Lisa and Paula showed evidence of learning that emerges through cooperation with their peers, and both showed evidence that the training had resulted in variety of developmental processes that were triggered by the ideas of others within their group.

Although Lisa was less aware of the realities of the classroom in comparison to Paula's experientially based wisdom of teaching, she presented herself as more comfortable with the prospects of improvisation from the outset. In this way, both women began their instructional period on equal footing, each with a challenge to overcome: Lisa would need to harness her musical freedom to suit a structure for herself, for her group, and for the students she would be teaching one day. Paula would need to overcome her own trepidation, or at least hesitation, in improvising (and in leading her own students to improvise).

The few polarities in their development may be best explained by constructivism, in that Lisa and Paula came to the improvisation training with a set of separate and distinctive experiences that defined their individual realities. Their social roles within the collaborative improvisation, their musical contributions, and their understanding of the pedagogical process for training young students were not the same. They were each challenged to confront the uncertainties and inconsistencies of their own images of improvisation and to construct better models of what it is and how it can be learned and taught. Consistent with Vygotsky's views, the more capable peers motivated and enriched the performance of less capable members of the group, thus improving the overall collaborative product.

Both Lisa and Paula showed abilities to discern and then play with the musical features of the model piece. They were drawn to the pulse, tempo, and rhythmic features of the model, and varied and modified these traits in their contributions to the group improvisation. Their improvisations within the style of the model continued to evolve from performance to performance, as rhythmic patterns were recombined, modified, and bridged by new musical material. Lisa was keen to recognize the timbral potential of the instruments as well, and to add this dimension to the improvisation. Paula was clearly in command when it came to providing structural clarity to a piece and in quickly channeling the group trials toward a well-established form. Both students were able to define a sequence of instruction for

“teaching improvisation,” one involving analytical listening similar to their own experience within the class and concentration on developing a new piece from the features of the model.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite the frequent mention of improvisation and its associated construct of creativity within the professional literature, few music education students are trained in the art of improvisation. Thus, there are multiple challenges in nurturing listening and improvisation skills of music education students that must be met before young students can be expected to be likewise nurtured. The interpretation of this study's data suggests that improvisational skills can be learned and that provisions for becoming grounded in techniques for facilitating such skill development in others can be accomplished within the context of a methods course.

An ethnographic lens was used to give focus to the manner in which music education students develop an understanding of improvisation and its pedagogy. Analysis of the thoughts and behaviors of two informants led to the crystallization of several themes relevant to the preparation of teachers for working with the musical needs and interests of secondary school students. Principally, it seems that students in music methods courses can be enabled, through training, (a) to conceive of musical improvisation as model-based and integrally linked to the teacher's careful design of strategies for analytical listening; (b) to recognize the pedagogical importance of providing “building blocks” through listening, teacher demonstration, and student imitation; (c) to accept the tripartite pedagogical structure for stimulating improvisation among students (listening, collaborative development and extension of component units of the model, and improvisatory performance and evaluation); and (d) to assist other students in socially interactive ways to produce a musically logical “solution” to their individual improvisation tasks or problems. Although a 5-week training period of once-weekly meetings might seem insufficient to cast aside preconceived notions of personal musicianship and pedagogical approaches for guiding younger students to improvise, experiences in spontaneous musical thinking were sparked by the instruction, and an instructional sequence by which to train others to improvise was rendered workable.

If improvisation, as a form of musical play, can be viewed as a means of musical knowing, then it may also be a subject of “serious business” to which teachers might give their greater attention. This musical play, and the teaching of students to improvise, can be conceived of within the frame of social constructivist views of learning. As Vygotsky (1978) suggested, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children [and other students] grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Students may best develop knowledge of music, as well as the process of improvisation, by “doing it” through the type of collaborative

musical play described within this study. The act of improvising music, framed by the teacher and further stimulated by the musical ideas of student colleagues, is in this way an important reflection of musical knowledge.

Even though bands, choirs, and orchestras have been the historical mainstay of some of the most stable and successful school music programs in the United States, other musical opportunities might be provided for students who are attracted to the performance of musical styles not featured in these standard ensembles. Much of the music of the world's percussion ensembles may be attractive to adolescents, who may be able to develop listening and performance skills as the foundation of their subsequent musically creative expressions. If such curriculum revision is to occur, however, music education students will require a more comprehensive preparation that includes improvisation training in familiar and less familiar styles and on Western and world instruments. Teacher educators hoping to meet the challenge of greater participation of secondary school students in school music programs may do well to consider the direction of this research, including further investigation of constructivist theories as applied to improvisation and its pedagogical processes, in order to prepare teachers for a broader spectrum of student needs and interests in music. If teacher educators can make a conscientious effort to reform and revitalize the content of methods classes and teacher education programs, there may be greater hope for the development of music programs for diverse populations of students in secondary schools.

## REFERENCES

- Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Campbell, P. S. (1991). *Lessons from the world*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Elliott, D. J. (1990, July). *Music as knowledge*. Paper presented at the Indiana Conference on Philosophy in Music Education, Bloomington, IN.
- Fowler, C. (1991). Finding the way to be basic: Music education in the 1990s and beyond. In R. J. Colwell (Ed.), *Basic concepts in music* (pp. 1-42). Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado.
- Gaston, E. T. (1968). *Music as therapy*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas.
- Gates, J. T. (1989). A historical comparison of public singing by American men and women. *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 37, 32-47.
- Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hammersly, M. (1992). *What's wrong with ethnography?* London: Routledge.
- Harris, M. (1968). *The rise of anthropological theory*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell.
- Jonassen, D. H. (1991). Evaluating constructivistic learning. *Educational Technology* 31(9), 21-30.

- Kingsbury, H. (1988). *Music, talent, and performance*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). (1993). *1993-1994 Handbook*. Reston, VA: Author.
- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) (1994). *The mood of American youth*. Washington, DC: Author.
- National standards for arts education. (1994). Reston, VA: Music Educators National Conference.
- Nettl, B. (1974). Thoughts on improvisation: A comparative approach. *The Musical Quarterly* 60(1), 1-19.
- Perkins, D. N. (1991). What constructivism demands of the learner. *Educational Technology*, 31(9), 31-38.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in teaching: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sadie, S. (1980). *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, vol. 9 (pp. 33-51). New York: Macmillan.
- Spradley, J. P., & McCurdy, D. W. (1972). *The cultural experience: Ethnography in complex society*. Chicago: SRA.
- Stubley, E. V. (1992). Philosophical foundations. In R. J. Colwell (Ed.), *Handbook of research in music teaching and learning* (pp. 3-20). New York: Schirmer Books.
- Taft, R. (1988). Ethnographic research methods. In J. P. Reeves (Ed.), *Educational research, method, and measurement* (pp. 59-63). Oxford, England: Pergamon Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willoughby, D. (1982). Musicianship: Some encouraging words. *College Music Symposium*, 22(2), 74-82.
- Wolcott, H. F. (1990). *Writing up qualitative research*. Newbury Park: CA: Sage Publications.
- Woods, D. (1986). Comprehensive musicianship. In L. Choksy (Ed), *Teaching music in the twentieth century* (pp. 104-112). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Submitted August 19, 1994; accepted August 29, 1994.