

Crossing educational and cultural boundaries in improvisational expertise development

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Title: Crossing educational and cultural boundaries in improvisational expertise development

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Keywords:

Improvisational expertise, elite, semi-elite, boundary crossing, transition (EARLI system: arts, self-regulation, teaching / instruction, lifelong learning)

Abstract (242 w):

This study aims to reveal environmental factors that affect successful and less successful improvisational expertise development. It explicitly focusses on boundary crossing in multiple musical contexts.

The study compared improvisational skill development of a group of six elite musical improvisers to a group of five semi-elite musical improvisers by means of a multiple site, structured case study design. A biographical research method was used to collect data for cross case analyses. Data were analyzed using a combination of a theory-based categorization system and open coding searching for actors and factors that affected vicious and virtuous cycles of learning.

Findings on learning during pre-conservatory, conservatory, and post-conservatory phases revealed distinct differences in boundary crossing activities between the elite and semi-elite improvisers. In order to develop musically the elite improvisers started to cross educational boundaries early in their musical careers and intensified this during and after the conservatory period (e.g., attending jam sessions on a regular basis). Semi-elite hardly mentioned engagement in such self-directed boundary crossing practice. This pattern was even more visible for cultural boundary crossing. Only the elite improvisers explicitly cited activities such as the participation in pluralistic musical (i.e., multicultural) and artistic projects (e.g., those that aim to synergize music and dance). Based on these findings we hypothesize that self-directed educational and cultural boundary crossing positively effect improvisational expertise, especially the development of a personal musical 'voice', a feature of musical professionalism that is imperative to survive in contemporary musical practice.

Extended Summary (991 w):

To understand improvisational expertise development in jazz musicians, it is important to study individual (aspirant) professionals as well as their development-facilitating environment. After all, successful individual development exists merely by the grace of an inspiring and supportive developmental setting. This study seeks to identify environmental factors that affect successful improvisational expertise development in jazz musicians. It explicitly explores the correspondence between the ability to 'operate' in a culturally heterogeneous learning and working environment and reaching high levels of improvisational expertise. Research questions of the study are: (1) What features the learning and working environment of musical improvisers in various stages of expertise development, (2) To what extent do learners direct the composition of the learning and working environment, and (3) Are there differences regarding (1) and (2) between musicians who reach the highest level of improvisational expertise ('elite') and those who do not ('semi-elite').

Method

Participants were 11 professional piano players. All had studied jazz and improvised music at conservatories in the Netherlands or Belgium. Six were elite improvising pianists ($n=6$, $Mage=45.3$, $SD=4.0$; 1 Female), five were semi-elite ($n=5$, $Mage=44.0$, $SD=5.8$; 1 Female). Participants were matched on sex, age, and conservatory class. Both groups identified themselves as 'improvising musicians'. Free narrative interviews were conducted asking the interviewees to describe their development as an improvising musician, following their timeline from birth till present. Analysis was organized along developmental phases (a) early years (basic musical skills); (b) introduction to jazz improvisation; (c) serious practice/focus on being a professional improvising musician; and (d) being a professional (improvising) musician using a classification system that included themes related to 'environment' and 'self-directedness'.

Results

Focusing on the environment during the early years we see that musicians of both groups were surrounded by music. They were encouraged to sing and play instruments, often in group, which resulted in high-level aural skills. Musical activities during the early ages can be characterized as 'playful'. Formal piano tuition started between the age of seven and 12 and mainly aimed at learning the classical piano repertoire. Beside the formal classical training, musicians of both groups started musical activities with peers in other musical genres as well. As such, they set foot in different communities of practice, some of which were initiated by the musicians themselves (e.g., garage bands). The elites entered the domain of jazz improvisation earlier than the non-elites. For instance some of them received improvisational skill training right from the beginning of formal piano tuition (beside the classical tuition). As a result they started the second phase earlier than others.

The second developmental phase comprises the introduction to jazz improvisation (e.g., witnessing a remarkable jazz concert and being extremely touched by it) and includes the start to learn to improvise. In this phase, especially the elite musicians (gradually) expanded their improvisational learning environment by starting small jazz groups or 'just play' with peers. Non-elites also extended both musical activities and the musical environment. However, their musical focus included other musical genres as well. In this phase, both groups of pianists practiced extensively for the entrance examination of the conservatory.

During the third phase the conservatory was the main community of practice for all pianists. Due to a scholarship they were now able to study full-time, which was highly valued. Less valued was the conservatory curriculum. Some elites openly questioned its content and often searched for alternative tuition. This emphasizes the self-directedness of the elites, a feature that was not noted by the non-elites. During the conservatory period, elites frequently entered different musical scenes (also abroad) in order to become better improvisers. As such, they crossed borders of different musical communities of practices. Jam sessions were mentioned as an important means to connect the scenes. While most elites adhered to the importance of such sessions for reasons of legitimate peripheral participation (i.e., to enter the scene and to develop; see also Doffman, 2011), semi-elites often developed a strong dislike against these 'educational' boundary practices. For them jam sessions were hardly an incitement for expertise development and networking, but rather sources of frustration.

The transition between the conservatory study period and professional work can be regarded a breaking point in the development of improvisational expertise. After graduation, musicians in the non-elite group invested substantially less time in improvisational skill practice and instead focused on professional teaching. Also the musicians in the elite group mentioned a decrease in practice time. However, they continued to spend time on further developing and executing musical projects. For them 'performance became practice'. The elites further mentioned an urge to further develop their personal voice. For that reason they initiated musical projects that included artists with different (non-)musical backgrounds (i.e., genres, cultures). Such cultural boundary crossing (see Reeder-Lundquist, 2002) is important, which is aptly expressed by one of the elite pianists who stated that "... diversity is necessary as it is no good when musicians constantly confirm each other."

Conclusion

This study shows that improvisational expertise develops best when (a) initial musical skill learning is grounded in a musically-rich and well-supported environment, (b) prevailing preferences regarding musical genre in formal educational settings fit the musical interests of the learner, and (c) (aspirant) improvisers have the opportunity to engage in various musical contexts. Successful musical improvisers in jazz seek out such risk-taking opportunities and consider boundaries between communities of musical and artistic practice as permeable, thus 'explorable'. Such behavior could relate to a certain musical personality, an interesting topic for future research.

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