The youth worker as jazz improviser: foregrounding education ‘in the moment’ within the professional development of youth workers

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Published online: 22 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Pete Harris (2014): The youth worker as jazz improviser: foregrounding education ‘in the moment’ within the professional development of youth workers, Professional Development in Education, DOI: 10.1080/19415257.2014.902858

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2014.902858
The youth worker as jazz improviser: foregrounding education ‘in the moment’ within the professional development of youth workers

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(Received 3 June 2013; accepted 3 March 2014)

This paper argues for the foregrounding of improvisation and education ‘in the moment’ within youth workers’ professional development. Devised in collaboration with third-year Youth and Community Work students and lecturers at a university in Birmingham, this participatory action research project drew on work of jazz ethnomusicologists and educationalists that details the extensive preparation involved in acquiring the ability to improvise within jazz in order to counter the misconception of youth work as educational practice ‘on the wing’. Through analysis of students’ reflective writing, lecturer feedback, interviews with lecturers and video footage of students leading improvised dialogues with their peers, the study sheds light on the challenges and possibilities involved in the teaching and assessment of improvisation in youth work and suggests that students can be encouraged to actively structure their awareness of improvisation and take responsibility for developing a disposition towards it. The author argues that this is important, not only because such improvised practice ‘works’ instrumentally in terms of engaging young people, many of whom are disengaged from formal education, but because it is also closely aligned ideologically with the value-driven purpose of youth work.

Keywords: youth work; improvisation; professional development; jazz; teaching; assessment

Introduction

This paper argues that readiness, willingness and ability to improvise are central to the role of the youth worker. It describes a small-scale participatory action research project, conducted in collaboration with third-year Youth and Community Work students and lecturers, which sought to clearly theorise improvisation in a youth work context and explore the challenges and possibilities inherent within the teaching and assessment of improvisation as part of youth workers’ professional development. By drawing on jazz musicology that details the extensive preparation involved in acquiring the ability to improvise within jazz, it asked whether more can be done in the classroom setting to embed an improvisatory disposition within youth work students on professional development programmes.

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The current conceptualisation of youth work in the United Kingdom

Youth work professional development programmes in the United Kingdom draw on a body of literature to identify what is distinct about youth work as compared with other professions that seek to educate and engage with young people, such as social work and teaching (see Infed n.d., Young 1999, Davies 2008, Jeffs and Smith 2008, Gilchrist et al. 2009, Batsleer and Davies 2010). Whereas in European pedagogical discourse, holistic, community-oriented work with young people falls under the umbrella of ‘social pedagogy’ (Hämäläinen 2003), in the United Kingdom an understanding of youth work as ‘informal’ as opposed to ‘formal’ education has emerged (Richardson and Wolfe 2006). This stresses some defining components to youth work, primarily the voluntary participation of young people in a relationship with the youth worker (Jeffs and Smith 2008), the creation of experiential learning opportunities through activities and conversation (Kolb 1976), and the explicit valuing of educational process over the prescribing of outcomes in the form of official curricula (Ord 2007). It draws on a mix of theoretical discourse, primarily: existentialist ontology and humanistic psychology in the form of ‘person-centred practice’ (Rogers 1961, Maslow 1962); a broadly ‘romantic’ ethic and progressive educational philosophy (Dewey 1997); and a critical perspective on education, society and power, most notably Paulo Freire’s (1972) notion of ‘dialogical’ education, whereby young people are not seen as passive recipients of knowledge but co-creators of it.

Current models of professional development in youth work

In line with professional development models in related fields such as social work and teaching, youth work training regimes in the United Kingdom have traditionally embraced a ‘community of practice’ model (Lave and Wenger 1991). This emphasises students learning experientially in the field under practice supervisors (Hawkins and Shohet 2007) who enable students to make links from practice to theory. Although there is no legal requirement to have a qualification in youth work to work in youth work settings, employers do ask for recognised qualifications and experience for more senior roles, and qualification forms part of negotiated pay rates. Students gain their qualified status after completion of an agreed number of supervised practice hours and (since 2010) the completion of a full BA (Hons) degree. Currently, in higher education the content of these routes to qualification in youth work varies across the United Kingdom.

Youth workers as educators ‘in the moment’

This study focuses on one aspect of youth workers’ professional development – the ability to think critically and improvise action spontaneously ‘in the moment’. This has been identified as a key feature of all professional expertise (Fook et al. 2000). For youth workers in the field, however, this facet of their practice is brought into even sharper focus. The physical and social context of youth work practice (in youth clubs, on the street, in public space and in young people’s ‘free’ time) means that opportunities for learning are necessarily negotiated, often occur during real time and need to be drawn from the immediate environment, ‘in the moment’. Youth workers may have little or no control over that environment and it may change
rapidly. They often do not know whom they will meet and under what circum-
stances. Groups can be transient and particularly susceptible to interruption by ran-
don events. As young people’s participation with youth work is voluntary, their
own priorities, or events in their own family and social lives, may take precedence
in terms of their choice to engage with youth workers. Often the work occurs in
environments where tension is high with young people who have previously rejected
structured, formal education and may be involved in activities that can be challeng-
ing to deal with. Therefore, workers need to be able to rapidly recognise aspects of
young people’s everyday life within their immediate environment (events, images,
conversations, etc.) as potential stimuli for educative dialogue, rather than relying on
structured lesson plans or preconceived programmes of activity.

This ‘in the moment’ educative approach is seen as pivotal not solely for instru-
mental reasons of necessity and efficacy, but also for value-driven reasons of pur-
pose – a purpose that is centred on notions of the common good and social justice
(Smith 1988). Youth work practice is predicated on a view that young people are
more intrinsically motivated to examine how they are positioned within their social
world when engaged in an educative process that begins with their immediate, con-
crete reality. This allows for both seemingly trivial and significant aspects of their
life to be first discovered, named and then imbued with meaning. In turn, this
enables them to act more autonomously and in ways that precipitate their personal
development and change within their social reality.

As agents of social change, youth workers seek to promote these existential and
Freirian tenets of practice as central to their aim of not simply re-engaging young
people in the mainstream (social control) but enabling young people to gain an
insight into their limited circumstances and challenge how they are marginalised
within society too (social action). The use of ‘generative themes’ (Freire 1972) that
emerge from the young people’s own reality is therefore both practically and ideo-
logically wedded to youth workers’ professional identity and their commitment to
‘conscientisation’; that is, the process of enabling young people to develop a critical
awareness of their own social reality.

**Policy imperatives and implications for youth work training**

These tenets have been subject to the changing policy imperatives of successive
governments in the United Kingdom. Social policy directed towards youth work
and other professions has taken a ‘technocratic turn’ as part of the newly
Open-access provision where the agenda for the work is free to be set by the
young people has increasingly become overtaken by ‘project work’ with a focus
dictated by notions of curriculum (Harris 2005) and an increasing emphasis on
advanced planning and professional ‘routines’ (Berger and Luckmann 1966)
drawn from a de-contextualised repertoire, rather than collaborative dialogue. As
a result, notions of ‘best practice’ and expertise within the youth work commu-
nity of practice have changed over time, in line with the technocratic direction of
policy, and this has impacted on the nature of initial and in-service training,
which continues to depend largely on the ongoing professional development of
‘qualified’ supervisors.
Alternative theorisations of the ‘art’ of youth work practice

In response, youth work professional discourse has attempted to capture what Young (2006) calls the ‘art’ of youth work. In this context, Donald Schon’s (1983, 1987) seminal picture of a professional simultaneously drawing on experience and reflecting on what they are doing, as they are doing it – what he calls ‘reflection in action’ – is central. Schon claims that the ability to make interactive decisions on the spur of the moment, and the practice based on it, are only disturbed when the practitioner is confronted with a new, abnormal situation or intuitively feels something is not right. At this point, ‘reflection in action’ begins; a questioning and criticising of the routine nature of the professional’s approach and an immediate restructuring of response. Essentially the worker begins to think on his/her feet and try out new courses of action, there and then.

This concept has been extensively critiqued by, amongst others, Michael Eraut (2007, p. 143), who raises the question as to what precisely Schon means by reflection in action and whether it is an adequate representation of the creative processes he seeks to describe. He claims that Schon does not have a ‘coherent view of reflection’ (Eraut 2007, p. 145), but rather a set of overlapping attributes that he prefers to classify as a theory of meta-cognition (the ability to think about how we think). He concludes that there is ‘no elaboration of the psychological realities of reflection in action’ (2007, p. 74), and that Schon’s work:

is not sufficiently analytical and articulated to enable us to follow the connections that must be made between elements of experience and elements of cognition so that we might see how reflection in action might be understood to occur. (Eraut 2007, p. 74)

Although the notion of reflective practice and its place in professional development have been (and continue to be) further developed and critiqued by later writers (Moon 1999, Bolton 2006, Ecclestone and Hayes 2008), writers within the youth work field such as Ord argue there is still an urgent need to clarify what he calls the ‘process’ of youth work:

for something that is so integral to youth work it is alarmingly absent from detailed explanation. (2007, p. 41)

So what concepts could be employed to further theorise this elusive process? Ord identifies that what is absent is an explicit explanation of the ‘intuitive’ interventions of youth workers. Intuitive practice could be defined as that which seeks to make decisions and judgements not solely on the basis of reason or rationality alone – certainly a feature of expertise in youth work. This, along with related notions such as innovation (doing something differently to achieve better results), could be considered a form of creativity – the invention or origination of something new, original or novel that has value (Mumford 2003, p. 110). Levi Strauss’s (1962) notion of ‘bricolage’ (the creation of a work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available) captures the unpredictable world of youth work and the need for the practitioner to make use of those materials in his or her immediate surroundings for educational purposes. However, none of these concepts, and especially that of ‘making do’ in order to solve problems, fully reflect why youth workers might positively choose to work ‘in the moment’. The assertion developed here is that this positive choice serves to actively mitigate against the temptation to bring preconceived
activities from a de-contextualised repertoire to their encounters with young people, and the risk of casting them in the role of passive receptor and ‘objectified other’ rather than the potent co-creator envisaged by Freire.

Moreover, the concept of problem-solving cannot capture the infinitely complex world of human relations in which youth workers operate. Young people cannot be reduced to the level of a ‘problem’ or ‘case’ solved by ‘tool kits’ in the hands of a ‘detached knower’ (Fenwick and Parsons 1998). This abstraction of issues from their social context (and from young people themselves) underestimates the reflexivity required to deal authentically with unique scenarios – the lived nature of professional practice – where the assessment of situations encountered needs to be constantly adjusted in an unfolding, emergent context. The particulars of that situation are crucial. The worker’s emotions, skills, dispositions, their sense of self, the possibilities uncovered by their moment-to-moment action in that situation – all fundamentally shape the worker’s perception of and response to a ‘problem’. Solutions, if they are to be found, are to be found not outside problems but from within them. Youth workers therefore need to be encouraged to reflexively see how their own interactions are also shaping the situation. In this sense, youth workers need to recognise that to change the worker is, in effect, to change the problem. They need to learn to live on the edge of surprise and uncertainty.

Theorising and teaching improvisation

This paper is therefore predicated on the view that education in the moment and improvisation could feature more prominently within youth workers’ professional development. A rigorous theorising of improvisation would involve ontological and epistemological questions (such as the nature of knowledge and the self, aesthetics, structure and agency, and human freedom, for example), only a selective overview of which is possible here. The word improvisation is derived from the Latin ‘improvisus’ and simply means ‘not seen ahead of time’, but in common parlance it can carry within it a strong sense of being an intensely personal, mysterious and therefore unteachable process. In contrast, Peters (2005, p. 301) argues that the theorisation and teaching of improvisation ‘must liberate itself from a whole set of assumptions inherited from romantic and post romantic art’ that unnecessarily stress the notion of ‘unmarked space’. His plea is for teachers of improvisation in any context to focus on bringing what may be in the realms of students’ unconscious competence, back under a degree of critical, reflective control and to recognise that in fact improvisation often involves the reconfiguring of existing familiar ideas:

Can improvisation be taught? No. Can the improviser be taught? Yes, but not how to improvise, rather to be made better aware of what improvisation might be, what it might consist of and where it might be found. (Peters 2005, p. 304)

Learning to improvise within any artistic domain involves mastery of a basic form that underpins the elements of its artistic expression. Whether the artist’s intention is to follow, modify or break the form, some sort of reference to what has been refined and accumulated by others is evident in his or her expression of art. In other words, art is no less an expression of the individual artist’s mind than a set of cultural, social and historical artefacts available to the artist, and whilst one cannot prepare
for unknown events, one can become predisposed to act in a certain manner regarding those unknown events (Dewey 1922).

In terms reminiscent of Levi Strauss’s bricoleur, Peters highlights a pejorative notion of improvisation as a kind of making do, the ability to make something out of nothing – “the makeshift, the cobbled together”. He quotes Neil Sorrell (1992):

The word itself poses all kinds of problems … because its usage in everyday speech, conveying something that is insufficiently prepared and of no lasting value (for example an improvised shelter). (Peters 2009, p. 9)

However, Neelands (2011), writing about improvisation in the context of drama, provides a more celebratory conceptualisation that captures the potency of any improvised practice beyond this ‘making do’. Substituting the phrases ‘drama’ with youth work and ‘young people’ with youth worker brings us close to a powerful description of improvised youth work practice:

Improvisation is itself a generic creative activity that in [drama] youth work requires [young people] the youth worker to imagine and respond to the immediate in ways that are authentic and existential. It is a crucible for the creative exploration of the centrality of the social context in determining human agency and capacity … It provides the direct lived experience of the tension between social and cultural structures and the capacity for human action. (Neelands cited in Sefton-Green et al. 2011, p. 171; emphasis added)

This conceptualisation hints at how improvisation can carry an intrinsic value in terms of greater authenticity and a stress on emancipatory human agency – two themes within the existentialist, Freirian practice favoured by youth workers. As a form of youth work practice, it encourages young people to think critically at a time when they are intrinsically motivated to do so, often resulting in the crossing of thresholds of understanding as to the nature of their environment.

**Developing the youth worker as jazz improviser metaphor**

Jeffs and Smith (2008) briefly employ jazz as a metaphor to illustrate the power of improvised youth work practice, claiming that informal educators must draw out the contribution of others whilst simultaneously making their own and that ‘Both jazz musicians and informal educators are improvisers’ (2008, p. 127).

Schon, himself an accomplished jazz clarinettist, also employed jazz improvisation as a metaphor, claiming: ‘conversation is collective verbal improvisation’ (1987, p. 30). He acknowledges that jazz improvisation is underpinned by deep theoretical knowledge but does not refer to youth work specifically, and his examples are drawn from a wide range of professional contexts. This paper then seeks to build on Schon’s and Jeffs and Smith’s jazz metaphor, linking it directly to the conversational and dialogical nature of youth work, and developing it by highlighting how jazz musicians and youth workers have something distinct in common in that they both improvise; not solely because they have to, but because they positively choose to.

Furthermore, youth work professional development programmes may have something to learn from how jazz musicians view improvisation and the process through which jazz musicians pass when learning how to improvise. Extensive, scholarly ethnographies of the jazz musician community (for example, Berliner 1994) shed light on the process of learning to improvise within jazz music and the value placed
on it in contrast to classical music where, on the whole, there is a predefined written score and the musician’s role is to faithfully recreate that score. Whereas there is a high degree of predictability and musicians learn their parts by rote, jazz differs from classical music in that:

there is no clear prescription of what is to be played ... given the highly exploratory and tentative nature of improvisation, the potential failure and incoherency always lurks just around the corner. (Barrett 1998, p. 606)

In a very real sense this uncertainty creates a freshness and edge to the music as well as a sense of peril that arises from an unpredictable outcome – an outcome that is heavily influenced by the ensemble, the environment, the mood of the performers and the audience.

Berliner’s work also illuminates how jazz improvisers think. He describes how, within the jazz community, pre-rehearsed ideas are avoided if at all possible. A culture exists that actively seeks the unfamiliar musical situation to avoid habitual thinking. Regulation and control are viewed as restricting interplay. Retrospective sense-making is preferred over attempts to plan for anticipated outcomes. Jazz musicians actively choose to leave space for improvisation within performance so as to avoid reliance on routines and create vibrancy. Youth workers seeking to engage those young people who have rejected the structure of formal schooling may recognise the saxophonist Lee Konitz’s approach to performance. He talks of ‘delivery’ that ‘strives to interpret the melody as if performing it for the first time’ (Lee Konitz in Berliner 1994, p. 67).

Chuck Israel provides an insight into how the seemingly tacit, unconscious process of improvisation is in fact based on a learnable, theoretical framework, whereby basic musical forms that reoccur can be recognised and form the basis of conscious practice regimes, and how an attempt is made to incorporate the ideas of others into the performer’s own style:

An essential ingredient in learning to be a musician is the ability to recognise a parallel case when confronted with one. If things remind you of other pieces when you approach a new piece you generally catalogue them very quickly so that you can draw upon your accumulated knowledge. (Chuck Israel in Berliner 1994, p. 78)

This process of generalisation could have parallels with improvised educational stimuli used by informal educators; for example, in the recognition of educational messages within events or images, or the underlying ‘frame’ (Goffman 1974) of a conversation.

Students of jazz are guided through a part-systematic/part-organic process of intensive, drill-like practice regimes (Coker 1964) involving the memorisation by rote of musical theory, scales and harmony. This is combined with listening to and seeking to replicate admired recordings, and even detailed transcription of favourite passages from solos and so forth. Current jazz education courses, such as that provided by Trinity College, London, regularly both teach and assess students’ improvisation, utilising highly developed taxonomies (Bloom et al. 1956) and drawing on pedagogical frameworks such as that offered by Purcell (2002). Purcell seeks to demystify the intangible process of learning to improvise and identify elements of the improvisation process in order to be able to replicate it. Purcell’s (2002) stages are presented as a continuous cycle of development through:
attraction for a musical object, or phrase;
reproduction of the admired object exactly and reliably;
application (researching all possible applications of the object);
manipulation (adapting the object to a wider range of contexts);
modification of elements of the object;
transformation of the object, which is now used as a prompt – ‘Meaning leads now’; and
readiness for attraction to a new object.

This research seeks to release youth work’s professional development programmes from the possibility of pedagogical paralysis borne out of approaches to knowledge that over-reify binary oppositions such as technical competence and craft. It explores the challenges and possibilities of adapting a pedagogy influenced by jazz musicology and conceptualises improvisation in youth work as follows:

- The deliberate, conscious choice to reserve space within practice for interventions to be made ‘in the moment’ and to avoid prescribed responses for reasons beyond instrumental necessity and for pedagogical benefit.
- A process of drawing on educational stimuli within the immediate environment achieved through the rapid recognition of underlying and parallel frames of meaning and drawing on accumulated knowledge.
- Working with the known, not seeking to propel oneself into the unknown; that is, the reworking of existing ideas as familiar patterns are revised and reconfigured.

Methodology

The research methodology adopted (participatory action research) sought to examine one primary research question: How can the teaching and assessment of improvisation form part of youth workers’ professional development? In line with participatory action research methods, students were engaged as co-enquirers throughout and fully involved in the research design. This consisted of the creation of a new module: ‘Advanced and Critical Reflective Practice’. The assessment task for the module consisted of three components – an essay critically evaluating theories of reflection, an assessment of an ‘improvised task’ made by an observing lecturer, and a further reflective piece written by the students on completion of the task.

An assessment taxonomy was devised based partly on assessment criteria from jazz education courses such as that at Trinity College, London and research into cognition in jazz improvisation (for example, May 2003). Some learning outcomes were simply copied verbatim, whilst others were adapted slightly, after consideration within the teaching team and with students, to reflect the nuances of the youth work context. This undertaking amounted to an attempt to articulate in ‘propositional form’ (Eraut 2007) what was expected of the students in terms of the improvised exercise. As such, this task sat at the nexus of the debate over the extent to which improvisation can be accurately described and objectively assessed. Terminology within the taxonomy (e.g. creativity, etc.) would, it was recognised, raise as many questions as it would answer. A pragmatic stance was adopted wherein it was recognised that the taxonomy was experimental and produced in part to raise questions of
interpretation that could then be analysed as part of the research, and that this should take precedence over attempts to perfect the tool prior to introducing it to students or engaging in protracted debate over language and semiotics. Students were also given detailed guidance as to how to approach their reflective writing.

After some tutor input theorising improvisation and its role in youth work practice, the lecturer then modelled an improvised dialogue based on an unseen stimulus, chosen by the students (such as an image, film clip, article, object or spontaneous comment). This was conducted in a ‘fishbowl’ format. The lecturer and six students sat in a circle with observers situated around the inner group who were able to take the place of the participants at any point by tapping them on the shoulder.

Students were then asked to facilitate unseen, improvised dialogical discussions in the same format without referring to a script or notes, with a small group of their peers. These were videoed using hand-held cameras. The use of video allowed for more detailed analysis of the responses of group participants and of the students’ performance over and above their purely verbal interventions, including their style of delivery. Video also enabled the researcher and lecturers to revisit key moments in real time when giving written feedback and facilitated collaborative analysis of data with students, lecturers and an external examiner. A smaller sample of videos was selected for more in-depth analysis (across the grade spectrum) using critical incident analysis (Tripp 1993) focusing on key moments within the research.

Despite the prospect of the filming and observation/assessment of students creating a degree of artificiality in terms of an improvised performance, encouragement was drawn from the fact that such assessment is part and parcel of drama and jazz music education, where such judgements are regularly made by tutors on jazz performance academic courses. Observation visits were made to such courses as part of preparation for the research.

Students then followed their seminar by writing a reflective piece, analysing their own ‘performance’, why the stimulus was effective and how it could be adapted to other contexts, and linking their experience to theories of reflection and improvisation. To avoid subjective bias, three other lecturers were also allocated student groups to observe, video and assess using the taxonomy. Assessment feedback was moderated in discussion within the course team and with an external examiner. As part of a triangulated approach, a series of semi-structured interviews were also conducted with lecturers, focusing on the assessment process and tool, their perceptions of the module generally and the nature of the feedback they gave students. These discussions were framed by the question ‘what do you perceive to be the challenges and possibilities of a module such as this?’ and included some viewing of selected video footage. These interviews were then transcribed and supplemented with field notes taken by all lecturers during the entire process.

**Ethics**

In line with the Newman University Research Ethics Committee’s guidelines, a research protocol was devised that acknowledged a range of ethical concerns. All data were anonymised and kept confidential. Student and lecturer involvement in the study remained voluntary at all times, but students could not choose to remove themselves from the assessment itself, as this was a course requirement. Students were therefore being asked to agree to an experimental approach to their curriculum at a time when assessment for them took on considerable significance. This was mitigated by
adopting a participatory approach that engaged students as collaborative partners throughout the research process and in the devising of the assessment itself.

**Sampling**

Student participants (a cohort of 27 third-year Youth and Community Work students, 9 male and 18 female) were selected purposively on the basis of being a cohort close to professional qualification and thereby (in theory at least) more likely to be able to cope with the demands of the module and research process. The cohort included a wide range of ages, ethnicities and academic ability. All members of the department team agreed to participate and included one programme leader and three senior lecturers. The small sample size allowed the detailed examination of a number of case studies in which thicker narrative descriptions of the pedagogical process could emerge.

**Research findings**

Initially, students’ reflective essays, transcriptions of interviews with lecturers and lecturers’ written feedback were analysed using a line-by-line analysis to generate a number of open codes and were then reassembled into a number of axial codes (Strauss and Corbin 1998). These were combined with themes generated from collaborative analysis of video footage and field notes to produce a number of analytic categories, the primary of which are presented below.

**Assessment challenges**

When asked what he felt the challenges of the module were, one lecturer highlighted student resistance:

> The first challenge is surprising the students, because what they are used to is nothing that is that testing in the moment. Most of it is all coursework … (Lecturer 1)

He felt, however, that the assessment method was able to pin down something about student dispositions:

> But for me it was quite telling. It took a bit of time to explain what it was, but then it was the good ones rose to the challenge and thought it was a fascinating thing to do, and the bad ones, well, the people who probably had fears about their own practice, were worried about it. (Lecturer 1)

Discussions around the process of devising the assessment taxonomy triggered some interesting debates as to artificiality and how aspects of musical performance might be mirrored or not in youth work practice (repetition, tension, tone, pace, phrasing, etc.). Repetition in particular was deemed worthy of further discussion as it was deemed to have a multi-faceted quality. Lecturers noted that there is clearly a difference between repetition as a result of a paucity of ideas and repetition used in order to create focus and intensity. Lecturers identified the ‘reading’ of this during the assessment as a potential challenge, along with distinguishing what might be more accurately characterised as group management skills and genuinely improvisatory interventions.
Initial student anxieties and growing confidence

Lecturer perceptions of student anxiety were confirmed by students’ written reflective accounts, which contained evidence that students found the module and the assessment of their improvisation skills stressful:

I was very nervous at the start of improvising for the reason that I did not know what the response was going to be. (Student 1)

Some students were able to gain some confidence through the process and talked about a change in their attitude and readiness to improvise:

In terms of improvisation, I feel more capable and confident to do it with young people. (Student 2)

This has motivated me to use improvisation as a tool when working with young people. (Student 3)

Parallel frames, student reflexivity and generative themes

In their reflective writing, some students began to see how their stimulus could be adapted to other contexts. This drawing of ‘parallels’ constituted signs of an emergence of the kind of improvisatory sensibility reminiscent of the jazz model:

… parallel contexts to do with race, age and sexism could all be explored through using a similar type of stimulus and group discussion to achieve similar effectiveness. … Having had the time to conceptualise and reflect I now feel able to actively experiment and improvise in similar situations. (Student 4)

Researcher field notes captured one instance of this, where on their way into the classroom one white student said: ‘I fucking hate Black History Month’. A black student immediately said that he would like to use this statement as his stimulus. Lecturers’ written feedback was used as a means to further cement students’ understanding of the possibilities for transforming stimuli in other contexts by highlighting the underlying psychological and sociological nature of the stimulus:

Essentially ‘Black History Month’ is an example of ‘positive action’ in response to structural inequality and a historical in-balance of power. There are many examples of positive action being applied to any situation where a group is in a relatively disadvantaged position, such as disabled people, women or gay and lesbian people. Talking about these will trigger a range of reactions, especially from members of the privileged or hegemonic group, depending on where they are at in terms of their own developing identity. (Lecturer feedback)

It also highlighted how the dialogue demonstrated the importance of student reflexivity:

I like how you recognise (reflexively) how your own ‘blackness’ might have impacted on the group, and of course this will also play out in your practice, because I do think that changing the worker in effect changes how the topic can be discussed. (Lecturer feedback)
In another scenario, captured on video, a student was asked to discuss with the 
group the question: ‘Which would you give up – your washing machine or your 
right to vote?’ One student felt that they could adapt this within their work with 
young people by using a mobile phone as a possession young people would be 
asked to swap for their democratic rights. Lecturer feedback encouraged the student 
to reflect on why this intervention would be effective and also generative:

If we want to get young people thinking about political concepts, or what they believe 
in or value, we can set up choices for them between possessions within their experience (or which might be something they are holding or talking about in the moment) and ideas which may not be. This is a good way to make political and moral education meaningful to young people and is what Paulo Freire meant by ‘generative themes’ based in people’s immediate reality. (Lecturer feedback)

Critical incidents

A number of critical incidents were analysed in more detail in order to interpret their 
significance and because they marked ‘an important change or turning point in this learner’s biography’ (Tripp 1993, p. 9). Some students found it hard to draw out the 
reasons why some stimuli were effective or to generalise from the particular of their 
own example to an understanding of the underlying ‘frame’ or meaning of the inter-
action (Goffman 1974). One student presented the group with a statement made by 
a social worker colleague in her work setting:

Youth workers are a bunch of unqualified, unskilled, untrained and inexperienced people doing my job on the cheap who do not realise the damage they are doing. (Student 5)

The group agreed that this amounted to a ‘tool for mirroring’; that is, group partici-
pants were being presented with an image of themselves as held by others. The 
group and the student were clearly ‘attracted’ (Purcell, stage 1) by the stimulus as a 
lively debate ensued. I prompted the student to consider whether it could be possible 
to ‘reproduce’ verbatim that stimulus in her practice with young people. Through 
further probing we agreed that the specific context (which she could not predict) 
would dictate how she applied the stimuli. I asked why the stimulus was effective as 
a catalyst to discussion and then invited her to suggest how such a stimulus could 
be ‘modified’ within youth work settings. The student was unable to do so, despite 
heavy prompting. Other students, however, were immediately able to see parallels, 
and quickly suggested that such a device could be ‘modified’ by presenting young 
people with images of themselves from the media and so forth. In this way they 
were able to demonstrate an ability to understand the meaning of the stimuli, allow 
that to ‘lead’ them (Purcell, stage 6) and were thereby more disposed to freely intro-
duce the concept into their practice, by utilising whatever means were at their dis-
posal. That is, their level of ‘readiness’ to improvise was enhanced.

Conversations ensued as to how within the youth work environment a plethora 
of opportunities present themselves to engage young people in a dialogue around 
how they are perceived by wider society, whether through headlines in newspapers, 
television programmes and so forth. Crucially, students were able to identify that 
such stimuli need not be prepared in advance, but could be rapidly recognised 
within the immediate environment, and that this immediacy would add intensity to 
the discussion. The discussion itself would also be transformative in its ability to
raise issues of demonisation of young people as ‘folk devils’ (Cohen 1972) and potentially contribute to the ‘conscientisation’ of young people through a ‘generative theme’ drawn from young people’s immediate reality. This illustrates the Freirian, dialogical potential of using such methods and their close relationship to improvisation, as detailed earlier. Through this exercise, an aspect of one student’s understanding and practice was exposed as in need of critique, whilst other students’ understanding of dialogue, conscientisation and improvised practice seemed to embed itself further.

Conclusion

Returning to the research question – ‘How can the teaching and assessment of improvisation be built into youth work professional development programmes’? – the findings suggest that it is possible to meaningfully embed the teaching and assessment of improvisation within the youth work training curriculum. Much of the data confirmed that a majority of students believed that their ability to improvise improved as result of the introduction of this module. Confidence levels seemed to be positively affected in all but a few students. Whether this could then be observed and demonstrated within their practice would require further longitudinal analysis. This study does suggest, however, that students can be encouraged to actively structure their awareness of improvisation and take responsibility for developing a disposition towards it, in part by developing skills of self-critique. The assessment of students’ ability to do this is inherently problematic, and carries all of the concomitant challenges of assessment (artificiality, asymmetry of power between student and lecturer, the ‘Hawthorne’ effect of observation, etc.) generally, but not withstanding these challenges the findings may point to possibilities for some youth and community work courses to further encourage an improvisatory professional disposition in students. Specifically, this study indicates that students will support assessment methods that test their readiness, willingness and ability to improvise when they are given an opportunity to influence that assessment and to reflect on the central place it plays in youth work practice.

Discussion and recommendations

Theorising youth workers’ expertise as improvisation (in its jazz-related guise) could have several wider advantages for youth work professional development programmes. It could serve to strengthen practitioners’ confidence in their craft and help meet the need for greater public understanding of the value of youth work practice. When incorporated into classroom teaching and assessment, it allows students in training to experience visceral, ‘in the moment’ practice within an overtly reflective and supportive environment. Furthermore, it could support the development of dispositions within students in training so that they begin to actively seek the unfamiliar, rather than simply learn to cope with it. It may also represent a more fitting response to the complexity of human relations in which youth workers operate and thereby help to preserve the integrity of process-based practice.

If assessment tools such as the one created could (at least partially) perform the function of distinguishing between those practitioners ready, willing and able to improvise and those not, an inability to articulate the centrality of improvisation to their profession and show some signs of being able to do it could arguably warrant
students failing to achieve professional qualification. An improvisatory disposition should sit equally with other personal qualities we seek to develop within youth work students as part of their effectiveness, such as initiative, persistence, creativity, leadership, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and so forth.

Supervised practice remains the dominant pedagogical approach for the development of professional craft knowledge, but in the light of a paucity of suitably qualified supervisors with an awareness of the importance of the value of improvisation when working with young people, youth work professional development programmes may need to proactively highlight improvisation as a hallmark of professional expertise. At the least, this study could be used to support efforts to promote this aspect of youth work and to underline to students (the workers and supervisors of the future) the importance of a commitment to improvisation within their professional practice. Within the field of music education an approach has been developed that attempts to treat improvisation skills as teachable. If there needs to be a renewed emphasis on improvisation we could do worse than look to attempts made in the field of music education to produce a meaningful pedagogy.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of Dave Trotman, John Holmes, Jo Trelfa and other lecturer colleagues – in particular Mike Seal who contributed greatly to the construction of the assessment taxonomy. Also, thanks to the student group who participated in this project at a ‘high-stakes’ moment in their degree programme.

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