

Improvised Music Leeds: a case study in adult education

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Introduction

This paper is an empirical piece of research taking the form of a case study of a community music workshop that ran from 1996 to 2000 in inner-city Leeds. Of the regular participants, which was typically a group of fourteen; five were female and nine male. The participants' ages spanned five decades ranging from those in their twenties to others in their sixties and the level of prior musical experience varied from beginners to music graduates. Low course fees were maintained throughout; the workshops being funded equally by Yorkshire Arts and Leeds Leisure Services as part of a Community Development programme.

Project background and context

I am a musician (drummer) working mainly in the genres of jazz and European Free Improvisation (EFI) and I was motivated to run music workshops from the mid nineteen-eighties as a way to try to develop some grass-roots activity in my home town and unearth musicians who might be future potential collaborators. A key influence was the developing Community Music movement which was broadly aligned with socialist ideals and encouraged inclusivity and open access.

Community music may be understood as an approach to active music making and musical knowing outside of formal teaching and learning situations. (It) is an intentional intervention, involving skilled music leaders, who facilitate group music-making experiences in environments that do not have set curricula.
(Higgins, 2012)

In fact, I chose a very particular music that is quite abstract, eschews conventional rhythmic grooves and which requires adherence to unambiguous guidelines, while giving the musicians great freedom to express themselves within agreed parameters.

Although Leeds is a bustling, confident metropolis, as one of 'the provinces' it suffers from the migration of ambitious musicians to the capital, where there is an established community of like-minded fellow travellers. My own circumstances led me to stay in the north, as I had a young family and I could not uproot them for an uncertain future in London. I worked with a handful of like-minded players to develop an improvised music scene in Leeds; building on the work done by Leeds Musicians' Collective in the seventies, organising and playing many concerts at the Termite Club (promoting improvised music since 1983) and I first inaugurated a series of music workshops for the Workers' Educational Association at the Swarthmore Centre, Leeds in 1985. This ran for three years during which time I devised strategies to teach based on a deconstruction of my own methods and use of the ideas of drummer/educator John Stevens (Stevens, 1985).

Improvised Music Leeds (IML)

IML was founded by myself and two other musicians in 1996. The plan was to run regular blocks of weekly workshops led by myself, prior to the final session in each series being led by an invited guest musician, in preparation for a public concert the following evening. Funding meant that high-profile musicians could be invited to work with the ensemble. IML existed for four years on a regular basis at Galway Mills, Holbeck (an industrial area south of the River Aire) with concerts taking place upstairs at The Adelphi public house. The geographical location of these events gave them a gritty atmosphere that many participants remembered fondly and this was crucial to their success.

Mature, amateur and many working class musicians often do not have access to the traditional conservatoire system of music education, therefore a group of this kind, meeting in informal settings (a piano warehouse in an industrial area of the city), was widely deemed to be an adventure as well as a stimulating, learning experience.

Community music is an expression of cultural democracy and musicians who work within it are focused on the concerns of making and creating musical opportunities for a wide range of people from many cultural groups. (They) have been reliant on the erratic world of grant aid, project funding and volunteering. This economic platform has created a landscape of professional insecurity and resulted in the majority of community musicians assuming a freelance employment status. Due to economic limitations of self-employment, community musicians needed to secure dependable income and jobs in order to pursue their objectives. Dictated by the capitalist imperative, practitioners developed a rich tapestry of practical projects *but found it difficult to find time and space to critically reflect.* (Higgins, 2012) My italics.

My motivation to make a case study of IML after a hiatus of nearly twenty years, started with my decision to undertake studies (M.Mus) at the University of Leeds in 2010 at the age of fifty-three and my subsequent PhD study. I finally found time and space to critically reflect!

Case study

I must stress that this study is from a very personal standpoint, as I inaugurated and ran the workshops. Apologies are offered for the perhaps too personal nature of the account.

The circumstances that led to the establishment of IML were quite specific to the location of an old mill in an industrial area south of the river in Leeds. Holbeck has a history that evolved with the industrial revolution. The buildings are predominantly large mills, many of which are now dilapidated and some of them have grand architectural features, such as one based on the Egyptian temple at Edfu (Marshall's Mill). Galway Mills is one such edifice, though not as grand as some, it is a solid stone, brick and cast iron structure that is quite imposing in its own way. I constructed a workshop/studio space on the top floor, which was sub-let from Besbrode Pianos, who stored hundreds of pianos over four floors in various states of playability.

One of my reasons for having a space in which to work, was a history of hiring rooms for music workshops around the city (West Yorkshire Playhouse, The Pavilion, Swarthmore Centre) and being repeatedly asked to be quiet or move, despite the owners having advance notice of the projected sound levels.

I had come to the conclusion that I needed a workspace isolated from dwellings, other study groups and audiences for plays.

We determined from the start that funding was essential so that we could invite guest musicians to work with the group and, in order to comply with the funding criteria, we needed to form a committee of three people: a chairperson (myself), a secretary (Damien Bowskill) and a treasurer (Pete Malham). Damien and Pete were both musician friends who were keen to be involved with IML and offered to be committee members.

We managed to secure equal funding from Yorkshire Arts and Leeds Leisure Services and had flyers printed which were distributed around Leeds: at concerts, libraries, music shops, record shops, theatres, colleges and community centres and also called on friends and acquaintances to spread the word as widely as possible.

I had developed strategies for running music workshops from my early efforts for the WEA at the Swarthmore Centre. EFI is a very specific way of making music that has, at its core, an egalitarian philosophy of inclusivity and an approach which dispenses with traditional musical hierarchies, such as, sections (brass, woodwind, percussion, rhythm) and, despite the use of the word *free*, the players are not free to play absolutely anything – freedom in this context means that the music is free of traditional melody, harmony and rhythmic structure. It is an engagement with sound as a medium to create an abstract art music that can be very moving, at best, and cacophonous in other circumstances.

Much activity that goes under the name of community music in Britain often embraces all musical styles and often concentrates on appropriated music from other cultures, such as Brazilian samba. I made no apology for my very specific field of activity and this was made clear from the start.

The sessions would be typically six or eight weekly meetings on Wednesday evenings and the players were asked to arrange themselves into a circle, in typical community arts style. The circle is used as it works perfectly – everyone can see each other, all are equal and, if the players exercise sensitivity, all will be audible.

I purposely went against musical orthodoxy by splitting apart similar instruments, such as saxophones, as there is a tendency for them (particularly male saxophonists) to engage in a musical arms-race (playing loud and dense passages to the exclusion of others). Interestingly, the guest leaders nearly always arranged the horns in sections, in the conventional sense.

..adult educators recognised that adults often knew a great deal about the subject they had registered to study and so the teachers of adults had to develop new methods of teaching. (Jarvis, 2014)

Many of my strategies were designed to make players listen closely to their fellow players and I deliberately paired unlikely instruments in duos that required restraint and high levels of control, such as a loud instrument (saxophone) with a quiet one (violin). Responsibility was equally shared, as I also stressed that the quiet instruments needed to project to make themselves heard within the group.

By putting myself forward as a teacher of this particular music, I had embarked on a steep learning-curve. From the beginning in 1985, I had no formal teacher-training and drew on my experience as a player, observations of other activity in this field and events taking place at that time, which were part of a social reaction to conservative political developments, specifically the Thatcher government's policies.

Societal changes from the nineteen-seventies, such as the growth of Feminism and activism tied to community empowerment led to small organisations forming to run classes such as this.

Accessibility was reinforced by low course fees.

Adult educators know that many of the liberal adult education subjects have not only been consigned to leisure time, they have been priced at such an exorbitant (level) that few people are able to afford to enrol in them.
(Jarvis, 2014)

Feedback from participants

In 2015 I contacted as many of the players as I could find (sadly one of the musicians, my good friend Pete Malham died in the interim) to recall their feelings and memories of the sessions. Initially my request was for recollections but I soon realised that a questionnaire would be more appropriate. I am here using a small sample of replies from Damien, Richard, Denis, Gloria and Nick.

The questionnaire asked for their name, instrument played, how they found out about the sessions, about any previous musical experience, their age, their opinion of the premises (Galway Mills), their opinion of how the sessions were run and of the music and their thoughts about each of the guest leaders and whether their experience of these sessions had any impact on their subsequent musical endeavours. I asked them to feel free to elaborate about the workshops and the concerts and to send any photographs that they might have. I was gratified with the results and pleasantly surprised to receive several photographs, as this was before the widespread use of smartphones with cameras.

Most attendees heard about the sessions by word-of-mouth from friends and acquaintances. At least two were told about them by a jazz animateur and others saw flyers in public places.

All viewed meeting in the pub after the sessions as a valuable part of the evening:

The pub... played an important part in terms of meeting before the workshop or going for a drink afterwards; providing a social context for getting to know the other members of the group. (Damien)

Finding IML was a real relief, frankly – as much for the discussions over a pint in the Lord Nelson afterwards as for the group experience. (Richard)

The participants' previous musical experience included playing ska/reggae, modern jazz, classical violin repertoire, community big band, improvisation, jazz funk, blues and two of their number were music college students (jazz course).

Damien expressed his opinion that the influence of IML extended beyond the workshops and concerts:

Jem Dobbs started coming to the workshop groups...and brought with him a number of people from the Bassa Bassa group who were interested in extending their improvising. There were other subgroups as well that grew out of the IML groupings that I wasn't part of. I remember seeing an improvising group once and you could hear Paul's IML group in there, so I think people walked away from the IML with a lot of information and techniques which is still out there.

Denis was one respondent who clearly valued the friendships he made at the sessions:

I suppose the main feeling I had about IML was one of camaraderie. It was always a great atmosphere, more like a musical commune. I have said before that I had some of the best times ever at the top of that old warehouse! The gigs were great too of course. I had never thought I would get the chance to play with any of those visiting musicians, after all I only started playing the alto when I was 54 in 1990 after seeing David Murray at Brecon (Jazz Festival).

Here, Denis talks about one of the guest musicians who had a particular impact:

Some stand out more than others, like Phil Wachsmann. He was such a refined guy, not at all the kind of person I met normally. I remember the gig we did with him and playing Stockhausen's *Set Sail For The Sun*... well a version of it anyway. It was so intense, like a musical meditation.

Gloria, a regular attendee, also expressed her feelings thus:

The camaraderie of like-minded musicians was good. We all communicated together well and pooled together as a unit. There were no apparent personality clashes.

Although, she was slightly uncomfortable in the quite severe industrial surroundings:

The location at Galway Mills was interesting, but a bit of a trek up all those stairs with a heavy instrument to carry. It is not somewhere where I would feel safe to attend on my own at night, as it was not very well lit and the area was not very salubrious.

Richard, then a young music college student expressed his frustration with his college experience:

Up till then my musical experiences were predominantly improvisation, Jazz, Ska/Reggae and African music. Music college was uniformly awful and hugely

depressing – seemingly designed to drive people away from music. I couldn't relate to any of my peers, who all seemed victim to deeply questionable drives for musical recognition, as clones of prior musical fortunates.

But he seemed to find stimulation at IML:

The session leader was deeply committed to improvised music and often managed to communicate this passion to the group. Frequently the group playing was analysed, usually to examine the sensitivity and musical courage or honesty that had been displayed (or not).

Not only did I determine to continue to play as often as possible in large improvising ensembles (which I'd not had the fortune to experience before, as a player), but I carried on enjoying playing with combinations of players from different disciplines and 'abilities', and I felt that these workshops confirmed my belief in improvisation as generally being the way forward and the prime node (which up till then I'd not had much chance to put into practise with many other players).

His replies confirm my belief in inter-generational learning as a positive force. At IML he was playing with and relating to other musicians, some of whom were of his parents' and grandparents' generations.

Nick, a young musician whose group subsequently went on to be quite successful offered this comment, which made me smile:

Just a really enjoyable, affirming experience overall. It was great to play with a large number of different musicians with different backgrounds/instruments/ideas. I remember fondly, one gig, playing my $\frac{3}{4}$ size crap out of tune violin, stood alongside a classically trained violinist and not feeling at all out of my depth!

Lifelong learning

As a mature student I have become something of an evangelist for *lifelong learning*, although I am aware that it is an imprecise term and debate goes on around the conflation of the words *learning* and *education* as well as the concept itself:

...the concept of lifelong learning (a phrase that I have always felt was more empirically accurate than *adult learning*) while allowing for the distinctiveness of the learning that does occur in adult life. Although I think it is wrong to argue that adulthood stands alone as a discrete, self-contained and separate stage of life, I do believe that there are forms of learning we engage in that are visible in a much more heightened form in adulthood as compared to childhood and adolescence. (Brookfield, 2000)

As the only child of working class parents, the artistic life to which I aspired was deemed impractical and I was encouraged to find work in a factory. I was determined to develop my musical skills and became a largely self-taught drummer.

This led to a lifelong career and to my eventual decision to augment my performing work with teaching, despite my lack of formal preparation. I became a drum teacher of school-age children at two music centres in West Yorkshire, as well as establishing and running music workshops in various locations.

My belief was that as a practitioner (musician), I should be able to instruct others in my subject. Of course, by underestimating the skill of the trained teacher, I learned some harsh lessons very quickly, but by *learning by doing* I gained confidence and developed strategies that were successful.

One distinctive area in liberal adult education was the recognition that teaching adults required different skills to teaching children.. (Jarvis, 2014)

The constant encouragement of young and emerging talent is to be applauded, but it implies that only the new has real value. There are numerous cases of older people not realising their full potential, supported by assumptions that their learning capacity is diminished and that they are incapable of meeting the challenges of further learning and development (Desjardins & Warnke, 2012). Mature artists often hit a peak in later life, balancing years of experience with renewed vigour and the encouragement of lifelong learning, particularly inter-generational learning has benefits for the whole of society.

Learning from living is another way of looking at lifelong learning and three different approaches to the study of learning through life and from life may be referred to here: biographical learning, experiential learning and learning from life itself. In fact, the basis of these is the assumption that life is a learning experience and, as Faure (1972) has argued, that we are always learning to be.. (Jarvis, 2014)

Conclusion

While considering these music workshops and my own experience as both an educator and mature student, the practice of *critical reflection* and the concepts of *lifelong learning* and *intergenerational learning* have dominated my thought processes.

Entering into university life in my fifties made me aware of the practice of critical reflection, beyond that which I had used in my musical life up to that point. In this study, critical reflection was undertaken both by myself and the respondents, who kindly gave their time to reply. The reflections of the respondents was illuminating, as I discovered their thoughts and memories of events from almost twenty years ago. Their responses confirmed my belief that the activity of the group had been of some value and that it had made a lasting impression.

I am aware that the concept of lifelong learning has a long history and that the idea of continued learning across the lifespan has many precedents, going back to antiquity.

They appear in different guises in the work of Plato, in early Chinese philosophy and in the work of Comenius. They are implicit within a number of religions, notably the Jewish faith. (Withnall, 2000)

Withnall (2000, p.293) also acknowledged the value of *intergenerational recognition and reciprocity*.

My own view is that intergenerational learning is a great calming influence in a learning environment, as peer group pressure is diffused and the contrasting influences of youthful vigour and life experience and the unique vantage points of each individual make for a balanced group dynamic. The combination of participants described in this study, whose ages spanned five decades are testament to this.

References

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