

YOUNG KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Researching instrumental teaching and learning: perspectives and challenges

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Abstract

Using a discourse that intersects my personal and professional experience as well as my analysis of the literature, this paper presents some common challenges identified in researching in instrumental lessons and some perspectives that shape the current paradigm in this territory. Besides, issues concerning how research on instrumental teaching and learning may have a substantial potential to make a difference in professional practices and the need to create bridges between teachers and academic researchers are also approached.

Keywords: instrumental teaching and learning; one-to-one lessons; instructional communication; music pedagogy; violin.

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Introduction

This paper, which is a result of a young keynote speaker given in the Post-ip'19, aims to identify some perspectives and challenges in the field of instrumental teaching and learning. During the last years, as violin teacher and participant of teacher-training courses, I met several teachers trying to find out a kind of “recipe” on how to teach violin, a recipe of how to teach vibrato, how to teach shifting, how to make students play in tune and so on. They seemed to believe that all students could learn from the same “way”, although they all would agree that there is no transversal formula to teaching. Until now, I still observe this perspective embedded in the discourse of several instrumental teachers, particularly those who are starting a career in this field.

Based on a literature review and my personal and professional experience, this paper demonstrates how research in this field can have a substantial potential to make a difference in professional practices. However, the challenges in researching in this field reflect also on the needed to create bridges between teachers and academic researchers. It seems urgent to develop a common language for a possible dialogue.

The scope of the analysis that will be presented is closely related to the teaching of western art music in a model designated as one-to-one, or, sometimes, studio practice. The authors are with few exceptions, those who have informed a body of research developed essentially in higher education music institutions in Europe, the United States and Australia. My personal and professional experience as researcher and teacher was essentially built in the Brazilian, Portuguese and British institutions.

This paper is organized into three parts. The first one is a literature review focused on some perspectives and challenges in researching in instrumental teaching and learning, where one-to-one lessons are particularly addressed. The second part presents a reflection based on my personal and professional experience. At last, some final thoughts and conclusions about this topic are presented.

1. Background

Some authors have suggested that in an instrumental lesson, one of the teacher's challenges, mainly in early stages of learning, is to approach complex content (shaped by a specific vocabulary) using effective, creative and clear communication, which can be understood and recalled by the student later (Petrakis and Konukman 2001). This questioning conducted me to investigate how instruction communication has been used by teachers in one-to-one instrumental lessons. The focus of this topic is based on the message conveyed by the teacher as well as the understanding of such a message by the student.

To communicate and express ideas about musical meaning has been considered as one of six instrumental/vocal teacher roles (Lennon and Reed, 2012). This particular role concerns the development of pedagogical skills, which are required to assist students to develop their artistry (Lennon and Reed 2012). The main body of research that investigates interactions between teacher and student has led mainly observational studies focused on behavioural components of instrumental teaching and learning (Burwell 2010; Hallam 2008; Rosenshine, Froehlich, and Fakhouri 2002). One of the main contributions of such studies has been the categorization of common behaviours in instrumental lessons.

Despite the differences between terminologies used, it was possible to observe four main broad behaviours in one-to-one instrumental interactions (Burwell 2010; Creech 2012; Hepler 1986; Siebenaler 1997; Simones, Schroeder, and Rodger 2015; Zhukov 2012): (i) *Student bodily action* - tuning, playing alone and accompanied, performing; (ii) *Student verbal action* - agree, disagree, contribute with their own idea, self-assess, choosing what to play, student joke, student excuse and student talking on non-musical matters; (iii) *Teacher hands-on* - modelling, scaffolding, demonstrating, accompany pupil, listening/ observing, performing, vocal performance, teacher body movement; (iv) *Teacher verbal action* - giving direction, problem solving, advice, coaching, music talk, teacher conceptual statements, teacher technical statements, attributional and non-attributional feedback, teacher joke, teacher disappointment, teacher sympathy, teacher questioning and giving practice suggestions (Foletto 2018).

The main body of research that investigates this topic reveals that teachers mostly talk during the lessons, the technique is often emphasized and questioning represents a small proportion of time (Burwell 2010; Creech 2012; Hepler 1986; Siebenaler 1997; Simones, Schroeder, and Rodger 2015; Zhukov 2012). Furthermore, these studies emphasize that students' activity in the lessons is mainly about playing.

Challenges

During my PhD, I aimed to find out strategies and tools that could optimize the process of communication. Although my intention was clear in my mind, I was conscious about the difficulties and challenges that I would probably face through researching in instrumental and teaching learning.

The context of one-to-one instrumental lessons reflects a scenario where individual teachers and students are isolated from researchers (Burwell 2005). The studio setting has been considered by researchers as not conducive to sharing of ideas, among participants or between participants and researchers, and there is much to be learned about the complexity of studio practices (Burwell 2018). Some authors described individual lessons as "something like a 'secret garden' compared with the scrutiny given to classroom behaviour in schools" (Young, Burwell, and Pickup 2003, 144).

According to Burwell (2010), individual differences, historical traditions and current practices of specialist instruments were considered to be the main variables that shape the current paradigm in instrumental lessons. As many aspects of the instrumental teaching and learning are nonverbal nature, it is a difficult task for researchers to observe, qualify or quantify what happens during the lessons. Obviously, the diversity of approaches is so wide in this area of study that it is difficult to make generalizations.

Based on this claim, it is possible to identify in the existing literature a certain pattern concerning the methodological choices. Most of the studies published in high impact journals have relied on observation and videotaped recorded lessons based on what Jorgensen (2009) described as “micro-studies”.

The authors who conducted these studies turned their attention to studio practices, investigating individual approaches in a variety of settings. Despite the advantages of such data collection tools, researchers must deal with the mismatch between time-consuming and analysis (Kennell 2002).

Furthermore, there are also some boundaries regarding the pedagogical environment, which have also constrained data collection. In my research, for example, I had some negative answers from teachers who didn't feel comfortable with someone observing their lessons, even so, if the researcher was not present.

Kennell (2002) suggests that these difficulties are intrinsically related to the closed relationship established between teachers and students. The author questions how instrumental lessons could be studied in such a way that the observations do not affect the phenomenon itself. In fact, concerns to preserve naturalness in such a field have been shaped the methodological and conceptual approaches adopted by many authors (Burwell 2010; Hultberg 2005; Kostka 1984). Although these constraints, recent research suggests that “this behaviour is starting to change, and teachers are opening the doors of their studios, admitting and sometimes working with researchers to develop a better, shared understanding of studio practices” (Burwell 2018, 4)

Perspectives

Due to this openness, it was possible to explore further the studio practices in the last years. Such investigations brought to light results that indicate a perceived emphasis on technical skills and an over-reliance on teacher demonstration and modelling, giving rise to the view that instrumental/vocal pedagogy was based on the master-apprentice model, involving imitation of the teacher by the student (Lennon and Reed 2012). The approach was seen to be teacher-directed rather than a student-centered, and teaching conducted in the context of an inherited tradition rooted in the nineteenth- century.

Although these results are becoming increasingly common, some contrary voices suggest the paradigm is changing. In 2010, the European project *Polifonia Working Group for Instrumental and Vocal Music Teacher Training* coordinated by the European Association of Conservatoires has investigated issues specifically related to instrumental teaching and learning in higher music education. This working group has concluded that “In recent years, in many countries, the focus of the pedagogical discourse has shifted

from the teacher to the student, from the musical product to musical processes and from teaching to learning. There have been changes concerning content and focus also, with a more holistic approach emerging and an increasing emphasis on developing the complete musician. There is a greater emphasis on more creative approaches, on developing student autonomy, on teaching students how to learn. Learning is seen in terms of developing ways of musical thinking rather than the acquisition of specific skills. Generally, the student's musical experience is no longer limited to the individual lesson with the individual teacher, and many young instrumentalists engage in a range of group learning contexts related to their instrument and to developing their general musicianship.

Overall, in many European countries, there would appear to be a shift from what appeared to be a teacher-directed pedagogy to more student-centered approaches. There is a growing recognition of the importance of student's individual learning styles, abilities, personalities and expectations, and their effect on the learning-teaching transaction. The teacher is regarded as facilitator and guide rather than as 'instructor'.

In my experience researching instrumental lessons, mainly in the early stages of learning, I have identified some different aspects from the Polifonia project. A research-based on an observational study focused in primary and secondary school levels with 6 violin teachers and 12 students lead me to conclude those participant teachers communicated in a one direction model, characterizing a teacher-directed approach (Foletto 2016). The main results demonstrated that teacher interacts and communicates a pedagogical content to the student based on their intentions, expectations, knowledge about the student and perceived professional responsibilities.

The content is defined taking into account the development of specific skills, which are conveyed through different strategies and sometimes summarized as teaching cues. The student, with his/her background and perception about the teacher's action and intention, selects the information to be stored in the memory to produce a given response (e.g. playing, talking, asking). Also, the student sometimes deliberately chooses his/her self-vocabulary to summarize information; in other words, they are using self-cues. Self-cues are a resource used and sometimes created by the student to summarize the overload of information related to the pedagogical content (Foletto 2016). The knowledge of students' self-cues can lead to student-centered learning, helping their sharing and negotiating concepts and meanings during the lesson. At the same time, it is a tool to understand how students learn. Some authors claim that teachers and students must share information and ideas, producing common meanings and understandings during the lessons (Welch 2012; Novak 2010; Magolda and King 2004). According to Novak (2010), "when learner and teacher are successful in negotiating and

sharing the meaning in a unit of knowledge, meaningful learning occurs” (Novak 2010, 18). Such negotiation requires an understanding of how the student realizes the content. Therefore, the vocabulary used would be created considering the student’s perceptions. When the student is totally familiarized with the vocabulary used, his engagement may increase because he is emotionally involved with the task (Wolfe 2007).

However, the results described above also suggest an existing dichotomy between some teacher intentions and adopted behaviours, which were informed by what they learnt from other teachers. On one hand, participating teachers seemed to be aware of each individual student’s differences as well as the importance of being adaptive to the student needs. On the other hand, teachers also spoke about the use of a pattern of action, which could be applied to all students (Foletto 2016). This result matches existing perspectives on instrumental teaching and learning, which suggest current practice in this context comes from an important oral tradition, where personal experience and historical narrative form the basis of contemporary common practice (Ford and Sloboda 2013).

Kennell (1992) reinforces the view that performance expertise is “passed from one generation of performers to the next through personal historical conventions” (Kennell 1992, 5). The contradictions in teachers’ instructional communication suggested here might also constrain the development of new pedagogical approaches, where the individuality of the students should be considered. In many cases, this constraint is dependent on their adherence to rigid forms of communication that are based on pedagogical heritage. These results may also inform the discussion focused on the importance of rethinking such a ‘one-model-fits-all’ (Perkins 2013).

2. Bridges between research and practice

During my academic trajectory, I met several teachers that manifested certain disbelief concerning academic research. They used to say that all the conclusions of the studies I use to read “were just theory”; in other words, these same teachers believed they were somehow useless. Those who still manifested some interest in knowing more about what was done in the universities usually complained about difficulties regarding the access and the academic language used by researchers.

However, it was also possible, in my experience, to identify researchers who seemed to consider the questioning and experience of teachers as very naïve. The odd thing is that several researchers working in this field were, in the early stages of their careers, instrumental teachers who seemed to deny their past on behalf of some values that come from other academic areas like psychology and sociology. The concerns in

publish articles in well-reputed journals seemed to stimulate a shift of focus regarding the research aims.

In the middle of this apparent mismatch, some initiatives were developed to try to fulfil this gap. One of them was the establishment of a Portuguese branch of the European String Teachers Association (ESTA-Portugal). In that time, I was convinced that, in a country like Portugal where the instrumental teaching is developed and structured, this association could play a central role on the purpose previously mentioned. However, this was far from being an easy task. Although Portugal has a large number of instrumental teachers and music schools it seems for me that there was no culture of taking part in events dedicated to discussing the paradigm of the profession. After some initial attempts, we realized that there was a lack of short training for teachers based on the national system of conservatoires. Teachers complained that some institutions did not provide academic training in this field to address their questions and dilemmas, once the basis of the modules they attended, when were master students (for example), were somehow generalists; in other words, more focus on a general music education than in the particularities of the instrumental and vocal teaching. In fact, this was a situation I lived myself, even when I was a PhD candidate. It seemed that people like me, with academic training as a performer and at same time pedagogical interests, were somehow in a kind of “limbo”. For some researchers from music education, we are performers, but for others, from performance studies, we are talking about education.

At this point, we started to organize in Portugal, a set of training courses and lectures dedicated to instrumental teachers; particularly string teachers. The idea was to promote a discussion on daily life problems lived by the participants, based on some values of academic research (as ethics, systematization and scepticism).

The aim was creating an environment of lifelong learning where teachers could share their doubts, perspectives and ideas in a friendly atmosphere. After this initial work, carried out through four years, the ESTA Portugal created a specific magazine, exclusively in Portuguese, dedicated to string teachers¹. This publication is open for research reports, case studies, descriptions of innovative pedagogical approaches, reports of experience and pedagogical projects. Parallel to this, in 2020, we organized the International meeting of ESTA. It was the first time this event was organized in this country². For this edition, which was designated as “*Bridges between research and practice*”, we introduced research papers as one of the formats for presentations, that is somehow new for this event that is organized since 1972. Our aim for this conference

¹ <https://issuu.com/estaportugal>

² Because of the Covid-19 Pandemic this conference was held online

was to enrich the perspectives on both sides as well as filling possible gaps that still exist in research and practice³

If on one hand, it was important to take the academia to teaching environments in music schools, on the other hand, it was also important to bring instrumental teachers based on music schools to academia. Because of this, the LBEAMUS (Laboratory for the Teaching and Learning of Musics at the University of Aveiro) was created in May 2017⁴. This laboratory provides a space for experimentation, meeting and sharing in which undergraduate, masters and doctoral students, as well as researchers and teachers, can develop research projects related to music teaching and learning.

Currently there are five action plans in LBEAMUS i.e. (i) development; (ii) host; (iii) providing; (iv) promoting; (v) producing. The first one, designated as development, concerns the development of pedagogical projects based on lived experiences accumulated by students, teachers and researchers from UA regarding music teaching and learning. The second (host) concerns the support of new projects developed by those interested in being associated with the laboratory. The third line (Providing) concerns the pedagogical offer of short term courses, seminars, lectures and workshops for teachers. The fourth line (extension) concerns the promotion of free action dedicated to aveirense community; i.e., masterclasses and one-to-one teaching. Finally, the fifth line (production) concerns the creation of pedagogical materials dedicated to the dissemination of projects developed in the laboratory. With this initiative, we hope, to provide artistic experiences that involve the Aveirense community and, at the same time, contribute to the reduction of the existing gap in the current framework of research on music education. This gap concerns the difficulty of articulation between the dissemination of knowledge production in academia and its application in practical contexts of teaching and learning.

3. Final thoughts

All the perspectives presented here are grounded on the experience of someone who tried to articulate different roles in her career (teacher, researcher and, also a performer). Actually, this reality is increasingly common among musicians from higher education institutions. This dynamic movement invites us, in my perspective, to rethink existing practices and “frozen concepts”.

It is a time to initiatives that stimulate the creation of bridges, where the boundaries between academia and the daily work of teachers could be dissolved. The initiatives here

³ <http://www.esta-2020.estaportugal.pt>

⁴ <http://www.inetmd.pt/index.php/en/inet-md/laboratorios/labeamus-learning-and-teaching-of-musics-laboratory-ua-decamenuen>

presented somehow aimed to achieve this. All of them tried to include the rigour from academic research and the richness of lived experiences by teachers. Certainly, it will not change all situation, but they can make in a near future a clear contribution, like the post-ip group who, step-by-step, has contributed to the dissolution of the barriers between established and young researchers. We cannot forget that both sides play a special role in academia.

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