McGill Journal of Education
Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill

Learning to Surrender: Creative teaching and learning practices
Apprendre la reddition : pratiques d'enseignement et d'apprentissage créatifs

Diana Ihnatovych

Volume 55, Number 3, Fall 2020

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083420ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1083420ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Ihnatovych, D. (2020). Learning to Surrender: Creative teaching and learning practices. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, *55*(3), 521–529. https://doi.org/10.7202/1083420ar

Article abstract

Independence and critical thinking are crucial for survival in our contemporary world. Learners and new teachers in training should be trusted to discover and develop their own voice in teaching and learning and be encouraged to surrender expectation to produce predetermined outcomes by strictly following scripted curriculum because it is detrimental to learners and teachers alike as it does not foster independence and critical thinking. Through engaging in creative teaching and learning practices that encourage imagination, questioning, observation and reflection we can see beyond what is perceived as normal and understandable and seek new ways to interpret reality and experience things of everyday life as well as learn to listen to our students and support them in their own discovery.

LEARNING TO SURRENDER: CREATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

DIANA IHNATOVYCH *University of British Columbia*

ABSTRACT. Independence and critical thinking are crucial for survival in our contemporary world. Learners and new teachers in training should be trusted to discover and develop their own voice in teaching and learning and be encouraged to surrender expectation to produce predetermined outcomes by strictly following scripted curriculum because it is detrimental to learners and teachers alike as it does not foster independence and critical thinking. Through engaging in creative teaching and learning practices that encourage imagination, questioning, observation and reflection, we can see beyond what is perceived as normal and understandable and seek new ways to interpret reality and experience things of everyday life as well as learn to listen to our students and support them in their own discovery.

APPRENDRE LA REDDITION : PRATIQUES D'ENSEIGNEMENT ET D'APPRENTISSAGE CRÉATIFS

RÉSUMÉ. L'indépendance et la pensée critique sont cruciales pour la survie dans notre monde contemporain. Il faut avoir confiance que les apprenants et les nouveaux enseignants en formation découvriront et développeront leur propre voix dans les domaines de l'enseignement et l'apprentissage et qu'ils seront encouragés à abandonner l'attente de produire des résultats prédéterminés en suivant strictement le programme d'études — un programme qui nuit aux apprenants et aux enseignants — car il ne favorise pas l'autonomie et l'esprit critique. En nous engageant dans des pratiques d'enseignement et d'apprentissage créatives qui encouragent l'imagination, le questionnement, l'observation et la réflexion, nous pouvons voir au-delà de ce qui est perçu comme normal et compréhensible. Nous pourrons alors découvrir de nouvelles façons d'interpréter la réalité et de vivre le quotidien ainsi qu'apprendre à écouter nos étudiants et les accompagner dans leurs propres découvertes.

Creative teaching and learning practices introduce effective, constructive ways for teachers to approach their work and acquire new perspectives on learners' capacities and needs. Such practices help teachers to conceive of their work with students as dialogue and not just a transfer of knowledge (Freire, 2008; Greene, 1995; Green, 2008; Pinar, 2004).

Creativity and innovation are worldwide areas of concern. Although students' ability for personal creative expression and unique, one-of-a-kind interpretation is acknowledged as a necessary / crucial skill for social and economic innovation and development to solve global economic, social and environmental issues (Altass & Wiebe, 2017; Bloom & Dole, 2018) and overall well-being (Nussbaum, 2011), our contemporary education in music, even education in general, does not encourage or support the expression of individual creativity and unique, one-of-a-kind interpretation: "Schools can nurture creativity in children, but they can also destroy it, and all too often do" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 116). Creative expression in children involves "a true interaction between individual and the environment" (Bloom & Gullotta, 2001, p. 11) that enables learners to become personally engaged in their own learning processes and develop skills and resilience necessary to adapt to a rapidly changing world (Greene, 1995; Wiebe et al., 2018; Zhao, 2012).

In this paper, I examine my lived experiences as a student and a teacher and define some key turning points in my personal and professional life as a part of my ongoing search for more creative ways of being a teacher. Through the lens of autoethnography and living inquiry, I seek to encourage creative expression and the ability to experience teaching more holistically. To do this, I explore the process of surrender or letting go of preconditioned expectations created by years of formal education. This process of surrender may allow one to unblock their creative forces and develop innovative solutions to improve life.

I understand the process of writing autoethnographically as a process of discovery, a process of learning by doing, a personal process. Carolyn Ellis (2009) writes,

> as an autoethnographer, I am both the author and focus of the story, the one who tells and the one who experiences, the observer and the observed ... I am the person at the intersection of the personal and the cultural, thinking and observing as an ethnographer and writing and describing as a storyteller (p. 13).

Each person is a cultural creation (Denzin, 2013). According to Ashton and Denton (2006), autoethnography is a biographical genre of writing and deep inquiry into our own experiences and those of our students that utilizes all of our senses: "The researcher-writer's interior inquiry and reflection mirror a larger human landscape, blurring the distinctions between the personal and the cultural" (p. 4). Jones et al. (2013) describe autoethnographic research processes as working with our insider knowledge based on life experiences to provide greater insight into, and deeper understanding of, cultural experiences.

Autoethnographic research requires commitment and sustained practice until it becomes a way of being in the world, a living inquiry. Autoethnography as living inquiry requires deep commitment to ongoing inquiry and questioning in a quest for an understanding of our experiences and discovery of new ways of living in our world. According to Meyer (2010), living inquiry is a practice of inquiry in "our everydayness and our immediate participation in daily life" (p. 86). In Meyer's (2006) words, living inquiry is "simply an inquiry into how to live with a quality of awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life" (p. 165).

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Since my birth, my sister Svetlana, fourteen years my senior, pursued her degree in piano performance at the local music college in Kaliningrad, Russia. I spent hours sitting under the piano listening to her daily practice. I relished the vibrations resonating into my small body. Our brand-new piano produced bright and sparkly tones. Its dark, polished amber surface reflected other furniture in the room. I would study my sister's hands over my head, petite hands, even to me. Her delicate, thin wrists flowed up and down as if breathing with the music. Sometimes my sister sang. I sang with her.

When I started my formal education in piano performance, my sister became my first teacher. During our student-directed lessons, in my childish stubbornness I insisted on my own method of learning, not allowing her to teach me any other way. I learned by imitation and improvisation. This way of knowing was all I was interested in. I asked her to show me a song on the piano and refused to read the notes.

Svetlana kept a diary and described my behaviour during our music lessons:

> Today, Diana did not let me play the song to the end, always taking my hands away from the keyboard and trying to play it herself. I feel like I am getting in the way and should just let her do what she wants (S. Ihnatovych, personal communication, May 15, 1990).

My sister paid close attention to my behaviour during lessons. She never insisted on doing something that did not interest me.

I learned to recognize many sounds, and they became my friends. Note A, a pink princess in a very big dress. Note B, a blue teddy bear. I improvised my own songs based on my favourite stories. I felt motivated to play the piano. I wanted to learn.

When my parents moved to Germany because of my father's work, my sister stayed in Russia. I missed my piano lessons greatly. After returning to Russia from Germany and then moving to Ukraine with my family, I enrolled in arts school in addition to my regular school. I continued to study piano with my

sister and learned solfège, music theory, music history, chamber ensemble, choir, choreography and drawing.

Halfway through my schooling, my sister moved to Lithuania to continue her education in piano performance at Vilnius Conservatory, and I transferred to another teacher. My new teacher served as head of the piano department. When I first met her, I felt intimidated by her big glasses with chunky black frames and the stern look in her eyes. She had a very traditional teaching style. She never asked me for my opinion. I had to learn how to follow her rules. I had to do what she told me to do.

External control and fear of failure replaced my joyful desire to play the piano and satisfaction with the music-making process. After many hours of exhausting, mechanical practice trying to produce the best results, I sustained my first serious injury. Following my teacher's instructions, I put too much stress on my tendons by trying to line up the tips of my curved fingers into an unnaturally straight line on the keyboard. During my recovery process, I questioned the need for countless hours of practice deprived of creative thought. I wondered if my hands and wrists would ever again breathe freely with the music.

During many years of professional piano performance training, my own opinion and unique voice were not encouraged or cultivated. I learned to perform what was explicitly outlined in the curriculum and was only allowed to do what my teachers told me. If I would have dared to disobey them and perform my own interpretation of the music, there would have been serious academic repercussions.

Curriculum was prescribed to me like medicine. I wish I knew then what I know now about medicine; it does not work for everyone. And yet, when medicine does not cure the patient, doctors claim that the patient failed the treatment, when more often it is the treatment that fails the patient.

Gouzouasis and Ryu (2015) observed that many practitioners of traditional piano methods subscribe to teaching music from the printed page during the first lesson and strictly follow a scripted curriculum throughout a child's music education. When I first started teaching, I also managed my teaching by following the course materials laid out by the method books and continued to do what others told me to do, teaching what the curriculum told me to teach. I experienced fear of inadequacy in my teaching because creative interpretation of curriculum and attention to my own way of being in this world were not encouraged or supported during my years of teacher education in music.

SEARCHING FOR VOICE

When I gave birth to my son, I discovered that after a lifetime of education in music I could not sing him a lullaby without first looking at the music and

then memorizing it. One afternoon, on a walk to the library downtown with my two-month-old son, I heard a First Nations mother humming a simple melody to her baby. It sounded beautiful. I stopped to talk with her.

> "What are you singing to your baby?", I asked her.

She looked at me, surprised:

> "I don't know; I'm just singing."

"I wish I could *just* sing," I said under my breath. That night when I nursed my son to sleep, I attempted to improvise with my voice. I had to make an effort to let myself sing. The very next day I started to sing my son's name during his diaper change. In response, he rewarded me with the sweetest cooing, followed by a big, toothless smile. He had heard my voice and enjoyed what he heard.

This experience significantly influenced my teaching and research, as a renewed sense of inner confidence gave me permission to see rules and regulations differently. I started to explore and seek out my own voice.

The work of Stephen Nachmanovitch's (1990) *Free play: Improvisation in life and art* helped to inform my understanding of creative expression and improvisation. Nachmanovitch wrote that our everyday speech is a case of shared improvisation through continuous choice of words and phrases to effectively communicate with one another and, therefore, we are all improvisers.

I also realized that the learning and teaching process will not always go as planned and that focusing on methodologies, pedagogical theory and the latest research is only part of the knowledge that is useful in my teaching. It is not so much "what you know" but "who you are" that makes the real difference — our personal, social, cultural and psychological histories. Knowing who we are as people and how we live in this world is important; a teacher's ability to take risks and to be surprising, spontaneous and responsive in life will naturally manifest in the classroom:

> In many schools, teaching is expected to follow syllabi that lay out what students will learn, as well as when and how they will learn it. But in a real classroom, whether kindergarten, graduate school, or the school of life, there are live people with personal needs and knowledge. ... You have to teach each person, each class group, and each moment as a particular case that calls out for particular handling. Planning an agenda of learning without knowing who is going to be there, what their strengths and weaknesses are, how they interact, prevents surprises and prevents learning. The teacher's art is to connect, in real time, the living bodies of the students with the living body of the knowledge (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 20).

In her work on releasing imagination and awakening curiosity, Greene (1995) encourages educators and learners to seek out, to look "at things as if they

could be otherwise" (p. 16), to break free from the constraints of preconceived curriculum by improvising and imagining new approaches to teaching and learning, being able to listen to their students and support them in their own discovery.

In his "Lingering note," an introduction to Aoki's collected works, Pinar (2004) writes about Aoki's conversation with Bobby Shew, a jazz trumpeter at the University of Alberta in 1981, when Ted Aoki asked the musician two questions: "When does an instrument cease to be an instrument ... and what is it to improvise? What is improvisation?" (p. 62). Aoki then told the musician that if we could understand "how an instrument can cease to be an instrument" (p. 63), we could maybe find a way out of production-oriented instrumentalism in curriculum. Aoki (in Pinar, 2004) reminds us that: "in education, and in curriculum particularly, under the hold of technological rationality, we have become so production oriented that the ends-means paradigm, *a* way to do, has become *the* way to do, indifferent to differences in the lived world of teachers and students. Could improvisation be a way to create spaces to allow differences to show through?" (p. 63).

Sanford Meisner (1987) defined improvisation as the study of impulse when our individuality is exposed and vulnerable. I developed appreciation for uncertainty, pedagogical risk-taking (Howard et al., 2018), interaction, surprise and responsiveness as a lifestyle and paid close attention to the way I live in the world. I had to learn how to balance and live in this new state, to let go of pre-conditioned expectations to control everything that I do, to surrender and trust myself to find my own way in life and in my teaching. Nachmanovitch (1990) described this process of finding balance and stepping out of one's comfort zone in a story about a girl who is learning how to ride a bike without hands. When she can finally do this, a complex array of emotions penetrates her being: fear, delight, pride, disbelief, elation and a desire to do it again and again. Nachmanovitch then compares this task to what classically trained musicians like myself feel when they discover that they are actually capable of playing music without a score.

I gave myself permission to explore and seek out my own voice and my own teaching style. I remembered my first piano lessons with my sister and began to improvise, tell stories, draw and compose with my students during our piano lessons. I remembered that my sister had a story for everything that we were learning together. She told me:

> Look, the piano keyboard is divided in half by the border between the two kingdoms, Treble Clef kingdom and Bass Clef kingdom. Middle C is guarding the border between the two kingdoms. I encourage you to play with the keys that live there and listen to the story that they are telling. Every note is a part the story.

As teachers, we need to remember that just like every note in my sister's story, we all have our own story to tell, and our different personalities have different creative styles: "There is no one idea of creativity that can describe it all" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 95). As Eisner (2002) articulates:

> One lesson the arts teach is that there can be more than one answer to a question and more than one solution to a problem; variability of outcome is okay. So much of current schooling is predicated on the assumption that success in teaching means getting a class to converge on the single correct answer that exists in the curriculum guide, or in the textbook, or in the teacher's head. The aim of teaching is to get everyone to the same destination and, in our culture, at about the same point in time (p. 196).

I started to teach my students music theory through their own music compositions, encouraging them to use their imagination. It demystified the composition process and allowed them to break free from thinking that they were not able to create music themselves. I also gave my students permission to feel free to play the piano and explore the sounds without long hours of practice trying to memorize a piece of music composed by someone else. I understood that improvisational space is a space where imagination is encouraged, and my own and my students' moments of being in the world matter. Greene (1995) reminds us that imagination is our primary means of creating an understanding of what happens in life. Through imagination, questioning, observation and reflection, we can see beyond what is perceived as normal and understandable and seek new ways to interpret reality and experience things in everyday life.

I believe that learners and new teachers in training should be trusted to discover and develop their own voice in teaching and learning and be encouraged to surrender expectation to produce predetermined outcomes by strictly following scripted curriculum: "The teacher must respond to evolving student thinking, which requires constant in-the-moment decision-making and the flexibility to teach without rigid adherence to a predetermined plan" (DeZutter, 2011). It is detrimental to learners and teachers alike as it does not foster the independence and critical thinking that are crucial for survival in our contemporary world.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The experience of surrendering my preconditioned expectations about my teaching created by years of formal education in music influenced my thinking about creativity, teaching and music education. As human beings we have an ability to grow and change. We can choose to look at our teaching practices with more openness and create conditions to allow new experiences in our daily teaching and learning practices. The process of surrendering preconditioned expectations imposed on us by educational and societal norms

allows us to discover who we are as human beings. Through this process, we become more attentive to those around us and also encourage them to learn how to listen to themselves and develop their creative potential to the fullest. We let go of predetermined outcomes that can be very static in nature and don't allow us to grow and explore. Eisner (2002) wrote that learning in the arts requires the willingness to surrender and allow the educational process to unfold as it develops. Eisner cautioned us that outcome-based expectations in education always result in intervention and do not allow learning to unfold naturally. If we pay attention to only what is intended, we may miss the unintended outcomes and growth in our educational experiences.

When I teach, I always remember that every minute of our life is improvised and that "we all have the capacity to create" (Paynter and Aston, 1970, p. 4). As a teacher, I am following Nachmanovitch's (1990) call to surrender in my teaching practice and in life:

> As an improvising musician, I am not in the music business; I am not in creativity business; I am in the "surrender" business. Improvisation is acceptance, in a single breath, of both transience and eternity ... Surrender means cultivating a comfortable attitude toward not-knowing, being nurtured by the mystery of moments that are dependably surprising, ever fresh (p. 21).

REFERENCES

Altass, P., & Wiebe, S. (2017). Obsolete ideologies for the knowledge based creative economy: Essential next steps for innovative classroom practices. *Teaching and Learning, 11*(1), 32–46. https://doi.org/10.26522/tl.v11i1.437

Ashton, W., & Denton, D. (2006). Introduction: Spirituality, ethnography and teaching. In W. Ashton & D. Denton (Eds.), *Spirituality, ethnography, and teaching: Stories from within* (pp. 1-14). Peter Lang Inc.

Bloom, L.A., & Dole, S. (2018). Creativity in education: A global concern. *Global Education Review 5*(1), 1–4.

Bloom, M., & Gullotta, T. P. (2001). Creativity and primary prevention: Terms of engagement. In M. Bloom & T.P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Promoting creativity across the life span*. (pp. 1–16). CWLA Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2013). Interpretive autoethnography. In S.L. Holman Jones, T.E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 123–142). Left Coast Press, Inc.

DeZutter, S. (2011). Professional improvisation and teacher education: Opening the conversation. In R. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 27–50). Cambridge University Press.

Eisner, E. W. (2002). *The arts and the creation of mind*. Yale University Press.

Ellis, C. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Left Coast Press, Inc.

Freire, P. (2008). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Gouzouasis, P., & Ryu, J. Y. (2015). A pedagogical tale from the piano studio: Autoethnography in early childhood music education research. *Music Education Research, 17*(4), 397–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2014.972924

Green, L. (2008). *Music, informal learning and the school: A new classroom pedagogy*. Ashgate Publishing.

Greene, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination: Essays on education, the arts, and social change*. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Howard, P., Becker, C., Wiebe, S., Carter, M., Gouzouasis, P., McClarnon, M., Richardson, P., Ricketts, K., & Schuman, L. (2018). Creativity and pedagogical innovation: Exploring teachers' experiences of risk-taking. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 50*(6), 850–864. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2018.1479451

Jones, S. L., Adams, T.E., & Ellis, C. (2013). Introduction: Coming to know autoethnography as more than a method. In S. L. Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Handbook of autoethnography* (pp. 17–47). Left Coast Press, Inc.

Meisner, S., & Longwell, D. (1987). *Sanford Meisner on acting* (1st ed.). Vintage Books.

Meyer, K. (2006). Living inquiry: A gateless gate and a beach. In W. Ashton & D. Denton (Eds.), *Spirituality, ethnography and teaching: Stories from within* (pp. 156–166). Peter Lang.

Meyer, K. (2010). Living inquiry: Me, myself and other. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 26*(1), 85–96.

Nachmanovitch, S. (1990). *Free play: Improvisation in life and art*. Jeremy P. Tarcher.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2011). *Creating capabilities: The human development approach*. Harvard University Press.

Paynter, J., & Aston, P. (1970). *Sound and silence: Classroom projects in creative music*. Cambridge.

Pinar, W. F. (2004). A lingering note: An introduction to the collected works of Ted Aoki. In W. F. Pinar & R. L. Irwin (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted Aoki* (pp. 1–89). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wiebe, S., Gouzouasis, P., Howard, P., McLarnon, M., Ricketts, K., & Shuman, L. (2018). Teaching creativity, creatively teaching: Exploring the arts and design thinking in education. Special capsule issue, *Canadian Journal of Education, 41*(1), i–vii.

Zhao, Y. (2012). *World class learners: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students*. Corwin Press.

DIANA IHNATOVYCH is a doctoral candidate in cross-faculty inquiry in education at the University of British Columbia. dianaihnatovych@gmail.com

DIANA IHNATOVYCH est candidate au doctorat en « cross-faculty inquiry » en éducation à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique. dianaihnatovych@gmail.com