

Practise as Praxis: A Freirian approach to instrumental practice within the Conservatoire

‘Education is always remade in the praxis. In order to *be*, it must *become*’
Paulo Freire - Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Introduction

Practise forms the largest proportion of individual study time within Undergraduate courses at UK Conservatoires. The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, for example, similar to other elite institutions of performance training, place emphasis on the attainment, and assessment, of ‘first study’ instrumental skills with at least half of the UG credits on the BMus(Hons) programme relating to these skills (BCU 2019). In line with the HE credit framework published by the QAA (QAA 2014), this requires students to spend 600 hours per academic year within this area of study. Typically students will receive 35 hours of 1:1 tuition per year, leaving 565 hours of individual practice study.

The clear weighting of the curriculum on practical performance skills and associated practise requirements highlights the the potential for this individual study, guided by active professional mentors, to be a powerful tool in shaping musicians skills, knowledge, beliefs, values and assumptions. Studies relating to musical practise tend to explore *what* student’s practise and *how* they do it, but there is limited research on *why* it is done. What is practise for? What do musicians hope to achieve and what can this tell us of any ideological or cultural forces? Can practise be an emancipatory act and, if so, what are the power structures requiring freedom from?

Using a Freirian perspective, I will seek to address these questions, investigating the learning cultures that shape the contemporary Conservatoire, aiming to provide an outline of how a Praxis based mode of practise, informed by comparison to experiential learning cycles, can integrate key tenets of Critical Pedagogy, challenging student’s assumptions of their unique temporal-spacial-cultural assumptions for the good of all society.

Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire’s seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1972), is a foundational text within the Critical Pedagogy movement, detailing his fundamental theoretical perspective. Freire offers us a pedagogy guided towards the liberation of ‘the oppressed’ through praxis based, dialogic learning between student/teachers. He demands that educators reject the enslaving methods of ‘banking’ which violently reinforce dominant ideology, limiting society’s liberty through endullment of critical thinking. Freire, and Critical Pedagogy advocates, aim to show the potential for education to be a revolutionary act, promoting critical consciousness, social responsibility and political activity, uncovering underlying power relationships for the liberation of ‘the oppressed’ as well as their oppressors.

‘Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with the kinds of educational theories and practices that encourage both students and teachers to develop an understanding of the interconnecting relationship among ideology, power and culture’. It ‘challenges us to

recognise, engage and critique (so as to transform) any existing undemocratic social practices and institutional structures that produce and sustain inequalities and oppressive social identities and relations' (Leistyna et al 1996).

Freire identifies the need for persons to become 'Humanised', defining all activity as essentially humanising or de-humanising; liberating or oppressing. The journey to 'completion' from a state of uncompleted consciousness is the project of the oppressed in opposition to the de-humanising violations of the oppressors. Through this struggle, the oppressed can both humanise themselves and their oppressors who are confronted by the violence of their own creation. It 'is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.' (Freire 1972, p.18)

The 'banking or transmission theory of school knowledge' is 'identified as the culprit standing in the way of critical consciousness' (Freire 1998). Within this method the teacher is the 'narrator' of dominant ideology, leading students to 'memorize mechanically' this narrated content. 'Worse yet, it turns them into "containers", into "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher' (Freire 1972, p.45). 'The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted in them, the less they develop the critical consciousness' (Freire 1972, p.46). 'Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety.' (Freire 1972, p.52)

The opposite of the banking concept is the 'problem-posing' approach, a method where teacher/students provoke critical reflection through discursive questioning of objective assumptions. Through this process 'that which had existed objectively but had not been perceived in its deeper implications ... begins to "stand out", assuming the character of a problem and therefore of challenge ... These elements are now objects of their consideration, and, as such objects of their action and cognition.' (Freire 1972, p.56), 'Whereas the banking method directly or indirectly reinforces men's fatalistic perception of their situation, the problem-posing method ... enables people to overcome their false perception of reality.' (Freire 1972, p.57)

'Authentic education is not carried on by 'A for B', or by 'A about B' but rather 'A with B' mediated by the world - a world which impresses and challenges both parties' (Freire 1972, p.66) This approach places the teacher/student relationship at the centre, arming all with the tools, in two distinct phases, to first unveil the nature of their own oppression and, secondly, to free themselves from the shackles of ideology and domination.

This process of deconstruction, rejection and reconstruction is only possible through the reflective action of 'Praxis', a combination of thought and action. 'Hence, the teacher-student and the student-teachers reflect simultaneously on themselves and world without dichotomising this reflection from action, and thus establish an authentic form of thought and action'. (Freire 1972, p.56) Proper praxis will reward the teacher/student with Conscientization, a critical consciousness and humanising *becoming*, promising freedom from oppression; an epistemological unchaining. Praxis is liberation from the Habitus (Bourdieu 1990), a weapon of de-colonising violence (Fanon 1963)

The Oppressed/Oppressor Conservatoire

Neoliberalism

'music pervades society as an element that is both economic and social. In a society where economics are front and centre, music becomes a commodity' Schmidt, P (2005)

Previous research has shown that the dominant ideology gripping Western society and, by translation, Higher Education is that of neoliberalism (Huxtable 2018). Market driven practises have transformed the 'Idea of a University' (Newman 1959) from a place of 'education' to that of 'training', preparing graduates for their roles as economic contributors rather than as democratic, political agents. 'Obviously, the dominant cultural reality will be determinant in organising a particular activity' (Cabedo-Mas & Díaz-Gómez 2013)

The Augur review hints that, differential HE fees will mean 'small arts institutions ... will need significant additional support' (Kernohan 2018) whilst supply side inequalities stifle the artistic opportunities across society (Gill 2017). The TEF rewards HEIs producing highly paid graduates (DfE 2016) whilst schools sideline the arts in favour of maths and english (The Secret Teacher 2018). The EBacc has been responsible for the devaluing of artistic subjects (Adams 2017) whilst new Government initiatives, in their bid to 'back young musicians', develop a technocratic 'knowledge based music curriculum' (DfE 2019). Neoliberalism has strangled Arts Education.

Although the Conservatoire faces these existential threats at the hands of neoliberalism, institutional leaders are complicit within the narrative (e.g. Conservatoire Principals advising on aforementioned 'knowledge based', 'knowledge rich' music curriculum). Similarly, arts organisations justify their own existence through neoliberal, economic metrics of worth, failing to highlight the 'priceless' value of what is not measurable (UK Music 2018). 'Imposition on schools by dominant oppressors means that schools and teachers reproduce and recreate these conditions which suit the oppressors' (Aronowitz 1998). The case now needs to be made for Music for Music's sake, for and by society, not on Neoliberal terms. 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House' (Lorde 1984)!

Mobilisation against neoliberal domination 'has been considered by many a kind of praxis' and 'praxis has within it the intrinsic impetus to seek the processes that arise from the logic of capital accumulation and to strategically align political efforts to organise working people to take advantage of these processes' (Nononi 2016) '

Conservatoire Culture

'Conservatoires had something 'seeping through the walls' that made people act in a certain way and adhere to certain values.' (Ford 2010)

'There is a striking lack of research that explores conservatoire culture' (Perkins 2013), 'traditional approaches and expectations of learning in the conservatoire environment are shaped by 'learning cultures', which remain largely unexplored and unchallenged' (Carey et al 2017). 'Opening the "secret garden"' (Mills 2007) of the Conservatoire has not been fully explored and provides opportunities for future research. These are mysterious spaces for most! However, research into the goals of both Conservatoires and their students does expose facets of neoliberal influence and exploitations of power.

Conservatoire's UK outline their 'model of education':

*'This is designed to equip artists with the means to develop a distinctive profile that will give them a **competitive edge** in the fast evolving creative **industries**. The high international reputation of UK conservatoires also rests on their ability to equip students with the necessary **skills** to mould and curate their own **careers**, leading to outstanding **employment trajectories** ... Conservatoire are places where **vital professional relationships** are forged.'* (CUK 2019)

Conservatoires have always been a place of 'training' but this model disproportionately expresses the contemporary narrative of the **neoliberal**, failing to identify any of the aesthetic, artistic, creative and collaborative aspects an artistic education can provide, nor the specific benefits Arts graduates bring to society.

The Birmingham Conservatoire is clear when stating within the BMus(Hons) programme specification that 'its main aim is to prepare students for a career in the music profession' (BCU 2018). 'Such a pedagogical model, which focusses exclusively on preparing students for the work force, abstracts education from the challenges of developing a critically conscious, socially responsible and politically active body and citizenry' (Leistyna et. al. 1996).

It is unlikely, therefore, that these institutional and programme aims would not feed into student's practise, as the most intensive of activities which form these programmes. Carey, Harrison and Dwyer (2017), in their study encouraging reflective practice in conservatoire students, asked participants their goals and practice methods. Responses show a limited reflexivity, emphasising a 'fixed', un-creative, limited and teacher led approach. Study tended towards the technical, prioritising an 'instrumental' and mechanical method rather than a creative and critical process.

An emphasis on the 'limited': Student Responses

'the goals I wrote about are all very technically based', 'I am working on technique, studies and pieces every day', 'my current learning goals include securing a breathing mechanism, increasing the strength of the upper range of my voice and focussing on correct vowel placement', 'technically speaking I am happy to continue concentrating on my left 4th finger for this semester and perhaps for the rest of the year.' (Carey et. al 2017)

The technical aspects of instrumental facility are valid but this emphasis on the technical limits the many more important aspects of musicianship (aural perception, improvisation, expressivity, style etc.) The notion that a student could spend a whole year working on one 'little finger' is both absurd and worrying, an indication that there is something very wrong here! Interestingly, Regelski (2005), makes the link between the technician, neoliberal and affronts to freedom noting, the 'average person unwittingly forsakes his or her freedom by uncritically having faith in false claims that scientism and **technicism promote rational economic planning**'

So why did the respondents make these choices? 'they are goals that will make me a better player' ... 'I want to lock myself into a routine that will help me to become successful'. But successful at what, and measured by whom? 'there are many examples where the students describe goals that their teacher selected for them' (Carey et al. 2017)

'I find that I am extremely nervous prior to lessons, and no matter how much I practice... I always feel that I have not done enough', 'I hope to ask more questions with regards to my teacher's expectations'.

This sense that if student's, blindly follow the guidance of their teacher, they will achieve technical mastery, success and induction into 'the profession' speak of Freire's banking method, training students to behave as obedient, empty vessels, producing 'a cultural environment in which practice is a predictable routine where cultural elitism is an accepted standard and where institutional climate puts emphasis on guarding your advantage and thinking strategically' (Davies 2004)

Teacher Student Relationships

'music education has privileged expert knowledge over understanding'. Schmidt (2005)

From a Freirian perspective, students and teachers possess equal value and power to teach/learn, both becoming student/teachers. Teaching/learning becomes the dialogic praxis of student/teachers re-examining epistemological foundations of truth for ideological emancipation.

The 'Master/Apprentice' model on which vocational programmes depend do not necessarily reflect this levelled hierarchy. The Conservatoire is defined by it's function to 'Conserve' traditions and methods but this can foster a too dominant/submissive relationship between teachers and students. As UCAS identify, 'all teaching staff at conservatoires are working professionals ... a particular tutor can be a main driving factor for choosing to study at a particular conservatoire' (UCAS 2018) but 'formal or informal gatekeepers to elite careers ... can have unusual sway over the fate of a young person trying to establish a career' (Tregear 2015). 'The power that teachers have, not just in making careers, but also in terms of people's confidence... is very easy to exploit.' (Ritchie 2013)

Examples of exploitation within Conservatoires has exploded in recent years. Recent research by the Incorporated Society of Musicians found that over 50% of arts students respondents had experienced 'bullying and discrimination including sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour' (ISM 2018). Specific cases of sexual abuse being covered up by institutions are particularly shocking. (Quinn et. al. 2015)

These examples represent extreme examples of the dangers resulting from unregulated power abuses within Conservatoires but, more insidiously, 'it can lead to the cultivation of entourages of adoring young students to be moulded into quasi-clones of the great guru' with ... 'students who do not conform to these teachers' expectations ... subject of callous cruelty through attempts to destroy their confidence.' (Tregar 2015). Regelski warns of "methodolatry", 'an almost religious or cult-like attachment to particular "techniques," "methods" or "materials" of teaching that too often fall far short of the kind of effective pragmatic results that are the ethical basis of teaching as professional praxis' (Regelski 2005).

If successful Master/Apprentice teaching 'is a process of socialising students into new behavioural norms and professional ways of working' (Pratt 1998) it is troubling that a staff member at the Royal Academy of Music included in her lecture notes, released at employment tribunal that, "the implication is that building a reputation is about fitting in and

being adaptable. Considering the way you look, the way you behave, a response to one another musically, what you say, and what you do not say. Everyone knows that having reputation is important. But how do you get one?”. (Employment Tribunal: 2201614/2018)

‘For music educators to empower their students, and provide transformative education, they must refuse the unwavering will to aspire to what we have grown accustomed to be’ (Schmidt 2005). A praxis based approach to practise must reconsider this teacher, student relationship, rebalancing the unique power unbalances within the Conservatoire, promoting a teacher/student, dialogic method in line with Critical Pedagogic theory.

Practise as Praxis

A simple, banking like, model for technician practice may appear as follows (below), showing limited reflective scope and a highly teacher led approach. Students apply teacher’s instructions with teacher’s practice methods to achieve the teacher’s goals.



This shows a highly ‘objective’ attitude towards the student, teaching A to B. The student is the object, ‘subject’ to the teachers pedagogic process where the teacher’s ‘proven methods’, having worked for them, should work for the student. As Regelski observes, ‘teachers tend ... to teach as they were taught’ creating a culture of teaching ‘that passes on teaching paradigms as technician methods’ (Regelski 2005). This lack of criticality towards the student is unsurprising based on the lack of reflexivity shown by the teacher to question their own learning experiences.

Reflection upon the nature of practise reveals a much more nuanced perspective on the forces and processes at work before, during and after the practise session. Exploration within, and connections between, these zones of influence represent opportunities for reflection/doing interactions, providing a framework for praxis based practise, respecting the theoretical principles of Critical Pedagogy.

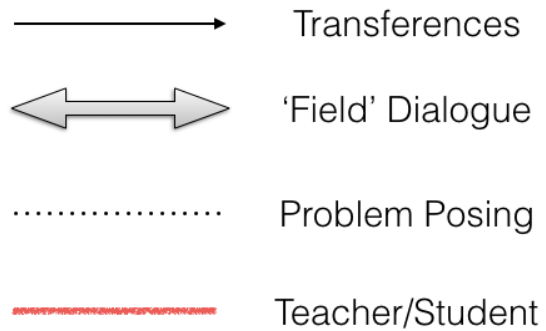
The Logic of Practice

‘Practice is the result of the relationship between an individual’s habitus, different forms of capital, and the field of action’ (Bourdieu 1990). ‘Conceptualised thus, practice is not simply what people ‘do’, but is rather a complex interaction of a field and its positions with the dispositions (habitus) and resources (capitals) of those acting in the space.’ (Perkins 2013). ‘Music is, therefore, understood as a social praxis’!!! (Cabedo-Mas et. al. 2013).

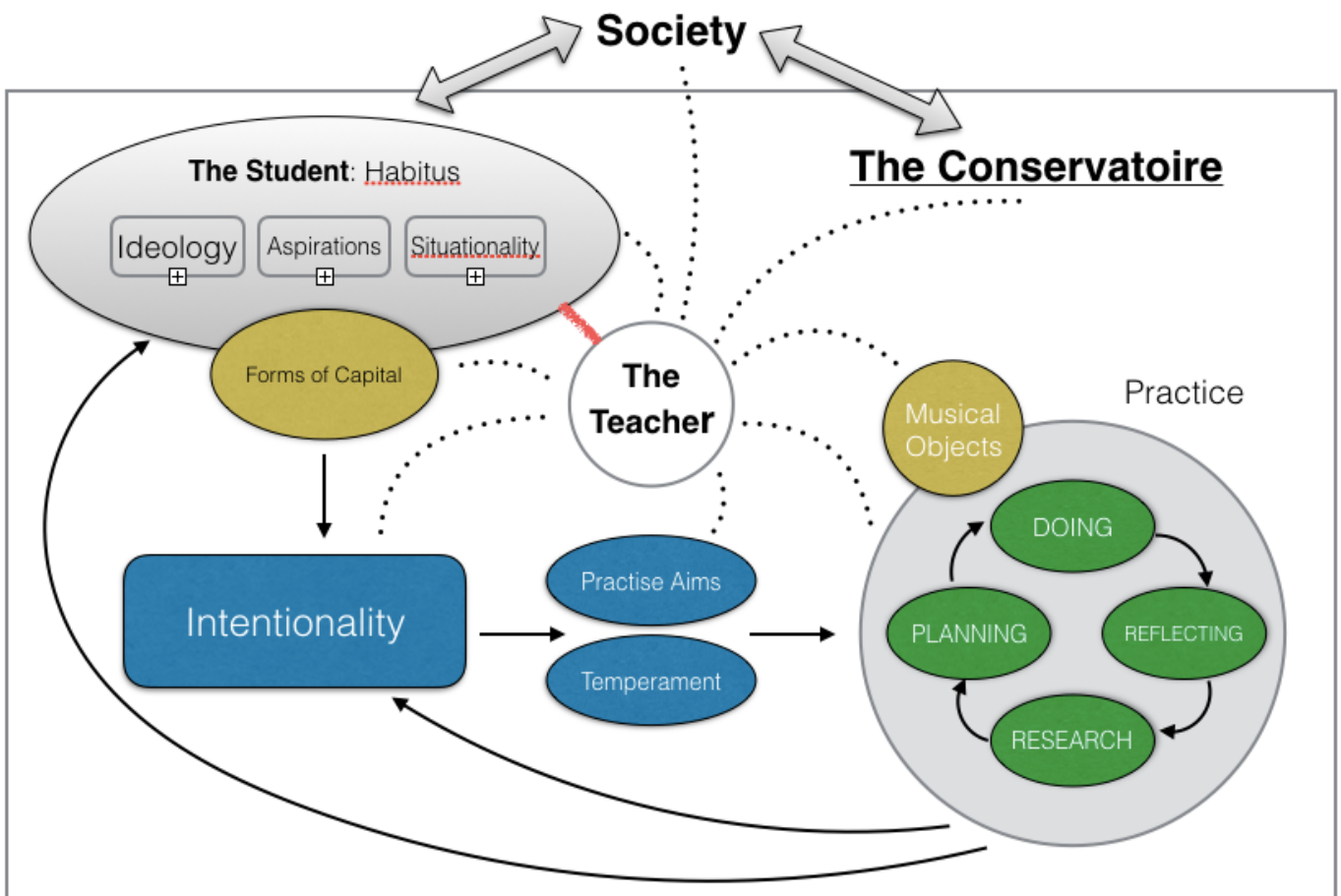
Praxis Model

The student/teacher exist within a field, which itself exists, and interacts with, the World of society. The teacher's role is to 'problem pose' the nature of the forces, relationships and objects that exist within these fields and their subjective interactions with the student's own habitus, itself subject to change through re-conceptualisations resultant through praxis/practise outcomes and temporal-spatial flux.

The student's task is to practise praxis, developing the reflective and critical power to unveil and modify modes of oppression existing within themselves, their teachers, the Conservatoire and society. 'To exist, humanely, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming.' (Freire 1972)



The Student



The student's 'disposition' represents their habitus. This could be thought as constituting ideologies, aspirations and situationality. This disposition is fundamental in establishing the student's intentionality, feeding into the goals and temperamental profile established before entering the practice room.

Ideology: 'An ideology, as seen by Critical Theory, is a system of seemingly rational ideas, practices and paradigms that serve to justify or legitimate the values, vested interests, and beliefs of a particular group' (Regelski 2005). The student's ideological profile is developed through a process of enculturation through existence within the fields of institution, society and the World. Teacher/students can problem pose these beliefs and interests through dialogic process.

Aspirations: The deep rooted Goals of the student. The dreams, ambitions and 'Will' that define the motives of the inner dialogue. The realm of the Mythic and the Subconscious.

Situationality: Situationality is the temporal-spatial context the student exists within. 'People as beings "in a situation", find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect upon their own "situationality" to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Human beings *are* because they *are in* a a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but critically act upon it.' Freire (1972). 'Any attempt at praxis must be attentive to historical contingencies and spatial specificities'. Nononi (2016)

Forms of Capital: Bourdieu (1986) theorised the forms of capital. These capital accumulations mediate the habitus' relationships with the field and resultant intentionality. Embodied Capital ('wealth converted ... into a habitus'), Institutional Capital ('cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications'), Social Capital (networks and relationships).

Intentionality

'Humans are 'subjectivities' with goals, needs and intentions, not simply 'objects' controlled by natural laws. They have reason and therefore can formulate and evaluate personal and collective purposes, goals and values (i.e they have intentionality)'. (Freire 1972)

Intentionality is the most overlooked aspect of practice. The *motives* students form, reflecting habitus/field interactions, are key in understanding how modes of oppression operate within the practice room. Not concerned with *what* is practised, or *how* it is done, intentionality is concerned with *Why* practise is done. What are the student's aiming to achieve and how do these aims interact with the various fields of influence? To overlook intentionality is to overlook the key principles that motivate action within the fields of influence.

To 'problem pose' intentionality is to question the relationship between the habitus, field and operations within the practice room. 'Intentionality is a key aspect of learning' (Cabedo-Mas, Díaz-Gómez 2013). Habitus comes 'into play' through the repetitive reinforcements of intentionality within the practice room. Whether this is a veiled or unveiled process depends on the depth of the praxis and effectivity of the problem posing method. For example, Freire's work with illiterate Brazilian peasants indicates a completely different intentionality for the attainment of literacy if compared with the neoliberal motives of the UK education system. Not what is learnt, but why it is learnt and for what purpose.

The student's intentionality informs practise aims and the temperament (mood, attitude, emotions) present. A clear, unveiled, view of intentionality will produce clear practise aims and a motivated, purposeful attitude, mindful of the motives fuelling the upcoming activities.

Musical Objects

The musical objects are the works, techniques, stylistic contexts, linguistic modes and performative gestures examined within the practise process.

Practice

The action/reflection character of praxis indicates a dialogic, conversational and cyclic process in, and of, itself. Action interacts with reflection through time, suggesting a process of learning through experience; 'experiential learning'. 'By moving through a cycle of concrete experience, observation and reflection, and the formulation of abstract generalisations, Kolb believes that individuals can come to hypotheses which in turn are cycled back into action' ... 'This cyclic linking of concepts, reflection and action may be taken to be a variety of praxis.' (Blunden 1997)

Kolb's theory of experiential learning offers a theoretical map for identifying the distinct stages of this cyclic journey (Kolb 1984). Concrete Experience (DOING) leads to a necessary Reflective Observation (REFLECTING). This reflective action identifies the need for further knowledge, resources or teacher/student dialogue. This Abstract Conceptualisation (RESEARCH) informs the Active Experimentation, or trying out of ideas (PLANNING), leading to the next Concrete Experience.

This experiential model operates at different cyclic levels simultaneously, from the most fundamental to the most profound. Take, for instance, the playing of a single note. This concrete experience, a set of muscular reflexes interacting with space, is reflected upon through the 'listening' of both the ear, eye and the body (how did the notes sound? how did the note feel? how did my body move? how do these motions, feelings and sound relate?). What questions are left unanswerable? Further research, attainment of knowledge and skills may be required to more explicitly explain the relationship between body and sound (e.g. technical control) which will require further experimentation, planning for the next concrete experience; the playing of the next note.

This process can take place over a fraction of a second, with review and planning near instantaneous, and/or over the course of a lifetime. Experiential learning is inevitable, it is the consciousness of this process and the intentionality it manifests from that define the praxis, necessarily problematised by the teacher/student.

Conclusion

Practise as Praxis is both possible and vitally necessary. Only a reflective response to action can liberate individuals from the types of previously undetected modes of oppression and power relationships identified within and without the Conservatoire.

Problem posing all aspects of these fields of influence represents a fundamental and important method of praxis, re-defining conscious intentionalities, constituting a true, educative, experience, freeing both teachers and students from ideological domination.

The products, outcomes and results of experiential learning processes can only inform, and reform, external fields of existence through, potentially, painful re-examinations of the 'habitus' and its intentionality in relation to the specific temporal-spatial conditions of existence. Artistic education must now justify its own existence through use of its own tools, able to 'dismantle the master's house' on its own terms. Practise/Praxis processes, instilled within the next generation of 'professional' musicians promises the possibility of Art as a socially priceless dialogue over an object/commodity of measurable, economic value. Praxis as a revolutionary act. 'Music education, centred upon conscientization becomes powerful'. (Schmidt 2005).

Both practise and praxis are concerned with change of the self. The dangers of favouring the purely mechanical and unthinking over the genuinely praxical is to reinforce and strengthen the chains of domination, one note at a time.

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