In Harmony and Dissonance: Reflections on the Parallels and Paradoxes in Academia and Conservatoire Settings

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Abstract

In this reflection, through a dialogue of shared experience within UK conservatoire settings, we will be asking, what is knowledge? Through discussion, reflection and reference to Freire's critical pedagogy, knowledge can be understood as reflexive and reflective experience and practice. We also ask, what is being conserved in conservatoires? This question is addressed through nuance and complexity of highlighting power structures from our own personal experiences. The implications this discussion has for scholarship is to keep the critical dialogue active regarding knowledge and who and what gets to contribute to music conservatoires.

Keywords: *music education, music conservatoires, parallels and paradoxes, knowledge systems*

Introduction/Background

After both meeting at an online music education conference, we recognised and appreciated we had similar yet different experiences as PhD students in music education and music psychology. A strong parallel evident was that we both navigated music conservatoire settings in various capacities. In this reflection, we position ourselves as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) and will unpack the parallels and paradoxes that we both face in our research and practice experiences and question the implications of the larger knowledge system in institutions, such as music conservatoires that aim to conserve ways of knowledge. The first author has taught violin and piano for 16 years in rural Scotland and continues to play in amateur orchestras. The second author is a double bass player,

having held a job as associate principal double bass at the Royal Scottish National Orchestra for 8 years.

Parallels and Paradoxes

MC: As the Covid-19 pandemic took the world aback, I found myself in a privileged position of having an income salary and a lot of time in hands. I had always dreamt of having a “normal” degree and a “normal” university experience, after such an intense musical upbringing and career: one spends so much time practicing/learning/playing a musical instrument from such an early age, that it becomes difficult to disentangle oneself from the instrument (Castro & Sternberg, 2026). As the pandemic presented a rare window of opportunity for self-development, I turned to academia and ticked that item off my bucket list.

My initial experience was one of “breaking-free”. Being allowed to choose what topics to write about, engaging in critical debates, collaborating with peers and professors. Not long after, however, the similarities between academia and conservatoire/classical music culture started to emerge. Ironically, I found myself in the position of having to use one system (academia) to look critically at the other (conservatoires). Very often, however, they paralleled each other, especially if one is doing academia from within a conservatoire. The so-called master-apprentice model of conservatoire teaching (Jorgensen, 2000) which places the teacher on a high pedestal as the artist and the student as the obedient follower, can easily be mirrored in interpersonal dynamics in academia. Research that must fit the mould, not rock the boat… research that exists before the researcher, and is there to enhance the work of its gatekeepers: the holy grail of “must-be-cited” authors, success measured in publication and citation indexes, the same one-fits-all approach one can easily find in music conservatoires. I will always treasure that first impression of academia, when I first entered it. One of collaboration and freedom; that “wow” at the idea of producing knowledge. First impressions are great that way, when you enter something with no prior assumptions, or any code of conduct for “how things work around here”. But what to do once you have absorbed and have been absorbed by the culture you work within. As researchers, do we ask for permission to think? A few years ago, Biranda Ford (2010) posed the question “what are (music) conservatoires for?”. Similarly, I wonder, what are academia and research for? Or who are they for? In either case, are institutions to serve the students or are students to serve the institutions?

NCR: In parallel and difference to MC’s experience, I too was (and still am) a musician, but I was entering back into academia in an attempt to make sense of my new life pathway. I was led back into academia after having my little boy. Due to his communication differences and autism diagnosis, I found myself asking why music was such a profound

communicative tool for my non-speaking son, and other autistic children like him. I acknowledge as a parent that I can give fully informed ethical consent in sharing our story. My son cannot give full ethical consent; therefore, he has assented with help with visuals to sharing our experience (BERA, 2018). Our communication journey was the fuel that led me to study a Master of Education in a conservatoire setting. During studying my Masters part time as well as working as a full-time music instructor, I could feel an ever-growing tension building between the theory I was learning and the real-life practice I was experiencing. Let me explain further. I was introduced and deeply immersed in the work of learning theorists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Both theorists, and many more, who I haven't mentioned, have been instrumental in progressing the world's understanding and my understanding of child development and both different in models. But even with their differences, both share a parallel that human cognition constantly develops throughout our lifetime. One assumption from this complex field of childhood development is learning occurs in stages, sometimes discrete, and sometimes in a linear fashion (Piaget, 1963; Vygotsky, 1967). But here lies the tension; I was not seeing this in my practice. I found it difficult to relate my practice to these theorists, though maybe many Masters of Education students do. In my experience, teaching does not fit nicely into discrete stages. It is messy, non-linear and unpredictably playful. Furthermore, I was teaching autistic children who displayed concentrated, repetitive and focused behaviours. Commonly these behaviours are stigmatized and stopped for autistic children (Cairns-Ratter, 2025; Kapp et al., 2019). Therefore, this led me to challenge why autistic children and their ways of learning, knowing and arguably being were misunderstood in music classrooms as well as wider society. Even though I am grateful for the Master's experience which allowed me to critique and question dominant ways of knowing, there was also another realisation and deeper paradox at play. I felt like during my Master's journey, I was unravelling. My difference in how I perceive and experience the world, much like some of my learners, was being amplified against the sounding board of the larger system of academia. I felt like a spotlight was now shining directly on my own practice, the way I learn, and how I didn't fit nicely into the learning models that I earlier described. I was not only left questioning my learners' experiences, but also my own. In order to understand the complexity of the system of academia, one which I was very much now immersed in, we draw on Freire's theory of critical pedagogy. This theoretical lens acts as a concrete moment for the complex power structures evident and can help in analytically understanding this multi-layered context; ultimately bringing critical consciousness to the foreground (Freire, 1970).

Even though my previous experience of relating to theories highlighted my differences, I feel that applying a theoretical framework to our experiences and reflections

not only aligns with Freire's (1970) thinking surrounding education and dialogue, but also in fact allows for challenging questions to be asked surrounding our own assumptions as well as the larger belief systems at play within academia.

I left my Master's journey grateful for the experiences and knowledge I gained from educators and peers and the critical voice I was encouraged to amplify from the very beginning. But I also left with a changed worldview questioning who gets to be a knower, and asking like MC, who is the learning for?

Knowledge and power

MC: If you have made it in your career to the point where you, arguably ambitiously, had set out to be in your music conservatoire years, you might think you have earned a seat at the "big table". One might be surprised however, how quickly one can feel like their 17-year-old self, walking through such big, imposing doors of these institutions, years or even decades later. The power held in these walls, through some kind of social memory maybe, reminds me: that no matter how old I become, every time I walk back in, I am 18: "Work harder! Be better! Follow the rules!". A shrinking sensation driven by systemic power, social norms and gatekeeping. But as a doctoral researcher, how does one contribute to knowledge without getting entangled in the perpetuation of such norms and culture? Gatekeeping around students in conservatoires seems to still be very much alive, since I was a music student myself. From what students can and cannot do, what opportunities might be good for them, and might they be able to decide that for themselves; to the failure in seeing any value in promoting participation in research (even with research departments now being a part of most conservatoires in the UK). My experience of how some research can be viewed in these institutions, is that it can be a distraction for some students. Alongside gatekeeping, self-preservation of conservatoires is key – as implied in the word itself (see Lawson, 2025) – and dissecting teaching practices and learning/ teaching cultures, through research, can easily feel threatening to this "conservation".

NCR: In order to challenge what counts as knowledge, and critique and challenge power structures, I feel it is important to acknowledge my own privilege in this academic journey I am still on. Much like MC, I can't always account for the system I am part of, but what this privilege does allow is for me and hopefully other music education researchers, is the chance to keep asking questions surrounding deep-rooted rigid systems. Our experiences align with research findings from conservatoire settings. As Perkins (2013) has highlighted, power structures and privilege in conservatoire settings are evident and even calls for a shift in worldview to challenge this deep-seated culture. Importantly and in parallel

with our thinking, reflective and reflexive practice (Perkins, 2013) is offered as a valuable tool to allow for at least the beginnings of change. As Freire (1970) alludes, for change to occur, critical reflection as well as action is needed.

Conclusion

We are both PhD researchers with parallels and paradoxes in our experience with both of us having attended or attending music conservatoires. MC candidly weaved us through the tensions between being a professional musician, educated at conservatoire settings where she has returned to conduct her PhD research, while NCR discussed the social and cultural complexities of disability and music education, offering Freire's critical pedagogy theory (Freire, 1970) as an analytical underpinning to try and make sense and question the dialogue between the inner and outer systems of academia. Synergies lie in both of our experiences, challenging the larger power structures at play, and what knowledge is and who gets to contribute. Ultimately being part of these systems has given us the tools to reflect, challenge and critique, but if systems remain static and inactive, then we must ask what are we conserving?

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