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It is all process

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CHAPTER 3

It is all process

SVEN BJERSTEDT

Just after performing an intense piano solo with my jazz band—this was some time after my PhD defense—I suddenly realized that something significant had happened. The concept of *storytelling*, this prominent image of jazz improvisation that I had made the object of so much scholarly scrutiny, was no longer a mere abstract figure of thought. The metaphor had transubstantiated. Through my mind, fingers, and body I experienced myself as an active part of *the story that was being told*. This story was told by myself, but not by me alone. It was told by me as a piano soloist in collaboration with several important co-actors on several levels: the tune we were performing; the musical tradition in which we were playing; my fellow musicians; and our audience. This was suddenly clear to me, and it was crucial. It was a metaphor-come-alive that has held me in its grip ever since, and it thoroughly influences my music. Conceptualization and practice go hand in glove.

When the opportunity arose a few years ago to undertake a PhD project about jazz improvisation, I jumped at it. In my mind there is no question that my scholarly efforts contributed something substantial in return to my musical practice; to put it plainly, my PhD studies helped me play the piano better. Through processes of widened, deepened, and prolonged reflection, my investigations into storytelling in jazz improvisation have had a significant impact on my artistic practice. The research project enabled me to benefit from the artistic experience and reflections of a number of distinguished musicians who generously gave me permission to collect and make use of the results of their artistic research. The thoughts they formulated are now part and parcel of my own artistic reflections. Even though this is probably not an unusual experience in artistic research, to me it was something of an epiphany to realize how the bi-directionality between scholastic and artistic knowledge can function. While the artist shapes a dissertation, it in turn shapes the artist.

In this chapter I will focus on lessons *from* the arts. What may reflection on jazz improvisation bring to qualitative research? Before going into detail, I will make a few

general suggestions. One lesson concerns the dynamics of different kinds of *authenticity*. Just as jazz improvisation can be authentic in more than one way, so can research. Another lesson concerns the dynamics of *observation* and *interpretation*. Just as jazz improvisation can be viewed both as a response to external impulses and as a manifestation of internal gestures, so can research. A third lesson concerns *identity*. Just as the notion of changing narrative identity can be seen as key to jazz improvisation, so may an expanded notion of prolonged engagement emerge as highly relevant to qualitative research processes. A fourth lesson concerns the dynamics of *improvisation* and *composition*. Just as jazz can be seen as process rather than product, so may research.

Twenty years ago, Penny Oldfather and Jane West (1994) addressed methodological issues in a playful attempt to shed light on the nature of qualitative inquiry through a metaphor of *qualitative research as jazz*. They pointed out that jazz music is characterized by its unifying structures and common body of knowledge as well as by the open-endedness of its improvisatory nature. The uniqueness of each improvisation, they held, corresponds to the adaptive methodologies and contextually bound findings of each qualitative inquiry.

I will attempt to contribute complementary views to those of Oldfather and West. I will not primarily use jazz as a metaphor. I suggest that four characteristics of jazz improvisation, in particular, have potential for shedding light on and perhaps deepening our understanding of qualitative research processes. On a conceptual level several of these perspectives encompass, as it were, the release from tensions; the dissolution of what are conventionally viewed as dichotomies. The aspects of qualitative research that I would like to discuss will relate to the problematization of these distinctions. I start by presenting very briefly these four characteristics of jazz improvisation, then proceed to a discussion of their respective relevance to processes of qualitative inquiry.

- (i) **Collective Tradition versus Individual Voice:** In jazz improvisation, the rules and conventions of musical *tradition* merge seamlessly with the expression of an individual *voice*.
- (ii) **External versus Internal:** In jazz improvisation, the musical outcome is a product of response to *external* impulses—in time and in space. This includes musical tradition as well as interplay with fellow musicians and audience. At the same time, the musical outcome is also a manifestation of *internal* gestures.
- (iii) **Change of Self Through Narrative:** Jazz improvisation may be conceived of as *change of self through narrative*.
- (iv) **Process versus Product:** In jazz improvisation, the *process* is the *product*.

In this chapter, I first formulate a few “lessons” from jazz improvisation for qualitative inquiry through a discussion of the polar positions (i) and (ii). Then I expand on how the

conception of jazz improvisation as change of self through narrative (iii) may be relevant to qualitative inquiry. Finally, returning to the distinction indicated by the title of this chapter, I reflect on possible lessons with regard to the distinction (iv) between process and product. Arguably, polar positions or dichotomies such as (i), (ii), and (iv) all concern aspects that are highly relevant, indispensable even, to our *understanding* of musical improvisation. Yet they can be of no particular use for defining it. In a sense, by encompassing both ends of these antithetical pairs, *improvisation blurs the distinctions*. I find this observation compelling—and all the more interesting when transferred to the field of research. What can the problematization or dissolution of these dichotomies bring to qualitative inquiry?

(i) Collective tradition *versus* individual voice

My PhD dissertation (Bjerstedt, 2014) focuses on the usage of the term “storytelling” with regard to jazz improvisation, setting out to clarify how this concept is understood by Swedish jazz musicians. The study aims at an exploration of a multivariety of perspectives. Dimensions of temporality, openness, wholeness, and listening stand out as crucial to jazz improvisation and to musicians’ understanding of it as “storytelling”. The study points to several implications—theoretical, artistic, educational, and sociological—of the usage of the concept of storytelling in connection with jazz improvisation. In conclusion, the concept of storytelling as a rich intermedial metaphor is shown to be significant to the practice and reflection of performing artists through its ability to mediate holistic views of what is considered to be of crucial importance in artistic practice, analysis, and education.

Authenticity with respect to tradition and self

My investigation points to musicians’ use of an expanded storytelling metaphor, where dichotomies such as solo versus collective and individual versus tradition are, in a sense, dissolved. This view provides us with a picture of *layered systems of communication* where the “story” may be told by everyone (all the musicians, all the audience, and the tradition) acting together. Jazz improvisation, then, is never a soloist’s enterprise in a strict sense. Apart from the individual (“solo”) voice, the layered systems of communication include the collective of musicians as well as larger contexts in space and time: audience and tradition.

In my thesis, I identify a number of artistic implications of the usage of “storytelling” in jazz contexts, including the dynamics of different kinds of authenticity: on the one hand, authenticity regarding the tradition in which the improviser is situated; on the other, authenticity regarding the improviser’s own individuality. Jazz improvisations typically include both. However, it might make sense to speak of a difference between American and Scandinavian storytelling in jazz, relating in interesting ways to the difference between two kinds of authenticity—I suggest the terms tradition-authenticity and self-authenticity. While self-authenticity is key to many Swedish jazz improvisers, some of them may arguably attach relatively less importance to tradition-authenticity (Bjerstedt, 2015b).

These perspectives might perhaps be viewed in terms of differences in the master narrative. Individual stories that are “told” in individual jazz improvisations may relate to larger narrative patterns. Different cultural and historical frameworks prompt different master narratives, different individual jazz improvisational “stories”—in a word, different music. The listener’s narrativization of music is arguably dependent on cultural competence. In the African American jazz tradition, certain cultural practices—often termed Signifyin(g)—permeate both performing and listening activities, characterized by double meaning, double consciousness, and double-voiced discourse, including the transformation of preexisting musical material, playing *on* cultural memory while playing *with* musical ideas (Gates, 1988; Floyd, 1995).

Modes of communication come about in response to human needs. A language of implication, of double meaning, may not have developed in the same way in Scandinavian jazz improvisation because this mode of expression was not needed in the same way as in African American culture. Hence, Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981, 1986) concepts of dialogism and double-voiced discourse, though eminently suited to the analysis of African American jazz, may arguably be somewhat less relevant in some European contexts.

Charlie Parker once said, “If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn” (Lewis, 1996, p. 119), and many informants in my investigation adhered to the view that the inclusion of personal narrative in solos is a crucial dimension in jazz. Generally speaking it would seem, then, that self-authenticity is of greater consequence to Swedish jazz improvisers than tradition-authenticity.

Needless to say, the notion of two kinds of authenticity can be transferred, expanded, and fruitfully applied to the field of research. To be sure, in naturalistic inquiry, a researcher will relate *both* to (i) traditions in the field which is the object of interpretation *and* to (ii) traditions of interpretation, i.e., scholarly traditions. In a previous article (Bjerstedt, 1993) I provided exemplification of how an historical text source can be subjected to radically different interpretations by historians.

In brief, there are built-in tensions in tradition-authenticity. Kirsten Hastrup (1999) has proposed three rather drastic metaphors to illuminate the demanding task of qualitative researchers. The interpretive process, she suggests, on the one hand includes the aspect or position of devoted identification and empathy (*shamanism*). On the other hand, it also includes the aspect of complete distancing from the object of research (*cannibalism*). Furthermore, the interpretive process typically includes a continuous oscillation between empathy and reflection (*schizophrenia*).

I suggest that this schizophrenia may be closely related to the notion of tradition-authenticity. The demand to relate to “tradition” is a two-edged sword, if both senses of tradition—(i) and (ii)—are included. I further suggest that one lesson to be learnt from the

field of jazz improvisation is the relevance of another kind of authenticity: self-authenticity. *Just as jazz improvisation can be authentic in more than one way, so can research.*

In sum, my first attempt at formulating a lesson from the arts concerns the relevance of both self-authenticity and tradition-authenticity to qualitative research, in a way that is analogous to the dynamics of these perspectives in jazz improvisation.

(ii) External *versus* internal

Returning to the topic of jazz improvisation, the focus on self-authenticity mentioned above should certainly not be interpreted as indicating that Swedish improvisers opt for the inner and neglect the outer. On the contrary, nothing is arguably more emphasized in the interviews than the importance of being mentally prepared, flexible, and able to adjust to the demands of the moment by way of the improviser's continuous *gaze outwards* towards fellow musicians and audience. But while requirements for tradition-authenticity are not particularly focused on by the informants, the requirements for self-authenticity are all the stronger. Complementary to the outwards gaze, then, is a *directionality inwards*, to one's inner musical voice and vision.

Improvisation has traditionally often been conceptualized in accordance with the outwards perspective rather than with its opposite: as a *response to external impulses* in time and space (situations, others). For instance, Gilbert Ryle (1976) argues that improvisation characterizes our everyday actions in response to life's ever-changing conditions: "to a partly novel situation the response is necessarily partly novel, else it is not a response" (p. 73). Liora Bresler (2006) contends that life requires improvisation, "distinguishing a life lived from a life endured" (p. 33).

Philip Alperson (2010) views improvisation in general as "a kind of goal-directed activity ('I need to get something to get this boulder out of the way'), but what makes the activity improvisatory is the sense that what is done is being done on the fly ('Maybe I can use this branch as a lever to move the rock')" (p. 273).

It would seem, then, that while there is a prevailing view of improvisation as a response to external impulses, my research points to an important alternative (or, rather, complementary) conceptualization: improvisation as a *manifestation of inner voice and vision*—as reflections of internal gestures such as states of mind, emotions, aims, and processes.

In sum, a traditional view of *improvisation as a response to external impulses* ought to be supplemented by the view of *improvisation as a manifestation of internal gestures*. Musical improvisations, I suggest, should be understood as *both* expressions of the inner *and* reflecting impressions of the outer.

External and internal perspectives, then, emerge as equally relevant to our understanding of jazz improvisation. Self-evidently, this notion, too, can be transferred, expanded and fruitfully applied to our understanding of processes of qualitative inquiry. Its relevance, I suggest, may stand out most clearly in connection with the dynamics of *observation* and *interpretation*. In order to understand as fully as possible the complexity of research processes, we ought not to neglect the relevance to qualitative inquiry of this perspective, of reflective work as expressions of the internal. *Just as jazz improvisation can be viewed both as a response to external impulses and as a manifestation of internal gestures, so can research.*

The dynamics of the external and the internal (dichotomy ii) may appear to be closely related to the interrelations between tradition and the individual voice (dichotomy i). In a way, given that musical tradition may be included as one aspect of the external and internal impulses, dichotomy (i) could be viewed as a special case of dichotomy (ii). This is a reasonable view. But I suggest that it is equally fruitful to treat these two distinctions separately, as they may be related in contradistinctive ways to the objective—subjective distinction. While the tradition—voice dichotomy (i) has to do with the tension between historical and present perspectives (between diachronicity and synchronicity), the external—internal dichotomy (ii) focuses on that which emerges in the present moment; that is, the concept “tradition” is interpreted not as an undivided, “objective” whole, but as individual, “subjective” instances of tradition, manifested as sorts of awakened memories in the creative mind and utilized in its processes of imagination.

In sum, my second attempt at formulating a lesson from the arts concerns the relevance of both internal and external perspectives to qualitative research, in a manner analogous to the conception of jazz improvisation as both expressions of the inner and reflecting impressions of the outer.

(iii) Change of self through narrative: A lesson from jazz improvisation

One crucial aspect of my investigation of storytelling in jazz improvisation is the conception of improvisation as *change of self through narrative*. Following Paul Ricoeur (1983–1985/1984–1988), we may see embodied jazz improvisation as an instance of changing narrative identity. Narrative identity—such as, for instance, the identity of the “storytelling” jazz improviser—is an identity that changes; the narrative model comprises the notion of the inner dialectics of personality. I regard this dialectic perspective on identity as highly relevant to jazz improvisation. On the one hand, the storytelling jazz improviser’s identity is a continuous improvisational process of construction. On the other hand, this construction (performance, improvisation) exists at all times in its very coming into being. The ontology of improvisation, I suggest, is best understood as a temporal performative process of construction of improvisational identity (Bjerstedt, 2014).

I suggest that this perspective may be expanded and serve as a contribution to a development of our conceptualization of qualitative research. I would argue that Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba's (1985) notion of *prolonged engagement* provides the means to construct a reasonable and relevant analogue in qualitative inquiry to the conception of change of self through narrative.

Not only is this notion of (jazz) improvisation as change of self through narrative of relevance to qualitative research; this lesson from the arts may pose relevant challenges for research processes as well as for research products. In the next two sections, I will develop some lines of argument, making use of (i) Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of *prolonged engagement*; and (ii) a reconsideration of *thesis structure* through the (jazz) notion of collective interplay.

Reconsidering the notion of prolonged engagement

Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate prolonged engagement as one of several techniques by which a researcher can ensure that the research results meet criteria of trustworthiness. Through the investment of time, certain purposes may be achieved: learning the "culture", testing for misinformation, and building trust, which, as they emphasize, is a "*developmental* [...] time-consuming process" (p. 303). Bresler (2013) points to the relevance of the concept of prolonged engagement to artistic experience. The case of my own research exemplifies two complementary kinds of prolonged engagement: with research, and with artistic practice. In addition to my prolonged artistic engagement with jazz improvisation practice, there is my prolonged research engagement with intermedial conceptual loans and metaphoricity (Bjerstedt, 2010). Then, in the course of my PhD investigation, my research engagement extended to jazz improvisation, and vice versa: the notion of intermedial metaphoricity informs my artistic practice. My background includes several decades as a performer in the same artistic field as my informants, who are all jazz musicians like myself. I suggest that the dynamics between the specific research process and such a prolonged engagement—with data, with theories, with rich experiences, with multi-layered reflections—may provide interesting and important perspectives on the very nature and significance of prolonged engagement.

In generalized terms, mine is a research project that deals with artistic thought and practice; hence, both my prolonged research engagement and my prolonged artistic engagement are of relevance to it. The concept of prolonged engagement is obviously not a monolithic one; the relations described above could be visualized in a four-part model of prolonged engagement (see Figure 1):

conceptual (research) engagement with conceptualizations	conceptual (research) engagement with artistic practice
practical (artistic) engagement with conceptualizations	practical (artistic) engagement with artistic practice

Figure 1: A four-part model of prolonged engagement

I suggest that this model (Figure 1), *mutatis mutandis*, might be of relevance to the notion of prolonged engagement in connection with all forms of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In my own case, all of these parts are interrelated. Also, they all interrelate to the *prolongation of engagement during multiple research projects over an extended time period*. Not only my previous—and ongoing—musicianship but also, to an important extent, my previous research has shaped and informed the dissertation—which, in its turn, will shape and inform my future investigations as well as my artistic practice in the future. (For a further discussion of this and other aspects of the interrelations between reflective practice and improvisatory art, see Bjerstedt, 2015a.)

Collective interplay: Reconsidering thesis structure

Musical improvisation is about the dynamics of tradition and freedom. In what ways may my own jazz improvisational practice have informed and shaped the style and structure of my dissertation? I will not be so bold as to suggest that the writing style of my thesis in any way approached or tried to assimilate a “jazzy” quality; however, in one respect I believe I did try to let one characteristic of jazz music inform the prose. The purpose of collecting and analyzing several perspectives on jazz improvisation is best served, I suggest, by supplying rich quotations. In order to provide optimal foundations for interpretation regarding several interrelated issues, the text ought to provide extensive encounters with a string of soloists in collective interplay, as it were: a multitude of voices. In a sense, then, my thesis leans more towards Bakhtinian dialogism than epic monologue. (The preponderance of extensive citations, while hopefully contributing to the richness of the picture, unfortunately also renders the volume somewhat heavier.)

Perhaps more importantly, the character of my own PhD study has made me reflect on questions about thesis structure. It may be argued that the informants in my interview investigation, all experienced musicians, have themselves conducted (artistic) research, and that my presentation of results ought thus to be viewed as a meta-analytical outline of research on the same epistemological level as an overview of (written) previous research. There is arguably no difference in principle between the (oral) perspectives of the informants and the (written) perspectives of previous research; indeed, with regard to the latter kind of

sources, Kenneth H. Phillips (2008) holds that “[t]hose citations are [...] research data” as well (p. 75).

To challenge or not to challenge conventions regarding the structure of a doctoral thesis? I think that *collective interplay* has informed its writing style, but not its overall structure, in the way it could have. After all, I did not juxtapose the oral perspectives of the informants and the written perspectives of previous research; they were separated, in the traditional manner, by a number of chapters on theory and methodology. Based on the argument that these perspectives are actually on the same epistemological level, I could have chosen to prioritize their collective interplay, too, and let it present a challenge to conventional thesis structure.

The conception of jazz improvisation as changing narrative identity, I argue, can be transferred, expanded and applied to our understanding of processes of qualitative inquiry; it has its research analogue in an expanded and developed notion of prolonged engagement. The different problematizations above emerge as exemplifications of what this notion can bring to our understanding of the complexity of research.

In sum, my third attempt at formulating a lesson from the arts concerns the relevance to qualitative research processes of an expanded and developed notion of prolonged engagement, analogous to the conception of jazz improvisation as changing narrative identity.

(iv) Process versus product

Christopher Small (1987) famously advocates a view of music as activity rather than entity. He strongly advises against all reification: “improvisation is all process; there is no product” (p. 301).

As noted initially, one prominent feature of the phenomenon of musical improvisation is that it seems to have potential for *blurring the distinctions*. Could the dichotomy process–product be problematized also in qualitative research? Arguably, while research always *is a process*, as long as it takes place within a research community in need of communication and exchange, it can hardly avoid *manifesting itself in research products*: dissertations, articles, etc. (A parallel: musical improvisation manifests itself in recordings.) This might be viewed as the commoditization of research.

Arguably, the close interrelations between the two aspects process and product cannot be dissolved. Just as the flow of time can be perceived as a series of frozen moments, so could any continuing process be viewed as a series of quasi-complete products. Interestingly, Keith Swanwick (1988) formulates a rather different perspective than the one advocated by Small; arguing that the product is central, Swanwick defines process as *products-over-time*. In the words of Göran Folkestad (1996), “[t]he product is central, as its development gives impulses to, and motivates the continuing process” (p. 67).

Two questions arise here: could qualitative research partake more of improvisation, less of composition? Could it manifest itself more as living organisms, less as evenly proportioned cathedrals (of different sizes)?

The considerations regarding prolonged engagement in the previous section include a number of problematizations. I argue that these difficulties may all be resolved to an extent through focusing on a view of qualitative inquiry as *process* rather than product.

Behind, or above, all of the tensions I have discussed in this chapter is the dichotomy *practice—conceptualization*. I strongly believe that this conceptual pair, which is at the heart of the relation between qualitative research and the arts, ought to be considered in relation to the notion of *prolonged engagement* (which could arguably be seen as qualitative inquiry's analogue to the conception of jazz improvisation as *change of self through narrative*). I have argued that this notion ought to be revised and expanded in order to serve our conceptualizations of qualitative research better. This revision, I think, is the key to questions such as the one posed above: Could qualitative research manifest itself more as living organisms, as processes rather than products?

I believe that through an expansion of the concept of prolonged engagement, through its inclusion of the “identity” of the researcher in a manner similar to that of the improvising musician—that is, in a sense analogous to that of change in self through narrative—, researchers may learn an interesting and relevant lesson from the art of jazz music. In sum, my fourth and final attempt at formulating a lesson from the arts amounts to a provocative paraphrase of Small's words about improvisation: *The product of qualitative inquiry is all process*.

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