

# Stealing Knowledge in a Landscape of Learning: Conceptualizations of Jazz Education

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*Theoretical approaches to learning in practice-based jazz improvisation contexts include situated learning and ecological perspectives. This article focuses on how interest-driven, self-sustaining jazz learning activities can be matched against the concepts of stolen knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1996) and landscape of learning (Bjerstedt, 2014). Based on an extensive interview study with Swedish professional jazz musicians, it argues that the multidirectedness involved in jazz improvisational practice calls for a rich learning ecology framework including several didactic loci.*

How can jazz students learn to improvise? It is reasonable that educational perspectives regarding musical improvisation, in contradistinction to the performance of written music, should have their distinctive features. Thomas (1991) points out that the ‘*knowing*’ skills ordinarily taught in music education – such as knowing notes, visual recognition, and kinesthetic response – are quite different from those developed through improvisation. Thomas terms the latter *music fluency skills*, contending that ‘they deal exclusively with the language – the sounds of music – rather than with the symbolism and rules of notation’ (p. 28).

Expanding on the differences between executing notated music and improvising ‘by ear’, Sidran (1981) formulates a version of the Deweyian slogan: in jazz improvisation, he argues, learning *is* doing:

One cannot be taught how to improvise black musical idioms, because the *theory* of improvisation develops through the *doing* of it. The act is the theory. [...] [I]mprovisation is based on the ability to ‘hear’ with internal ears the sound of an internal voice. (pp. 61–62)

A number of theoretical approaches to musical learning can be considered pertinent to learning in practice-based jazz improvisation contexts: for instance, *situated learning*, including the concepts of *legitimate peripheral participation* and *cognitive apprenticeship* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nielsen & Kvale, 2000), and *ecological perspectives* on perception, music, and musical learning (Gibson, 1979/1986; Boyce-Tillman, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Barron, 2006).

Barron (2006) points out that an ecology of education is ‘a dynamic learning system open to multiple influences’ where people appropriate and adapt the resources provided, thereby choosing, developing, and creating their own learning opportunities (p. 200). These perspectives are arguably highly relevant to jazz learning. In this article, the notion

of interest-driven, self-sustaining learning activities in the field of jazz improvisation will be matched against the concepts of *stolen knowledge* (Brown & Duguid, 1996) and *landscape of learning* (Bjerstedt, 2014). With reference to an extensive qualitative interview study with Swedish professional jazz musicians, I will argue that the multidirectedness involved in jazz improvisational practice calls for a rich *learning ecology framework* including several *didactic loci*.

### Stealing Knowledge

Apprentice-like training has long been recognized as an important educational possibility. In his article 'The school is a lousy place to learn anything in', Becker (1972) points to the discrepancy between what a school intends to teach and what its pupils actually learn:

I do not suggest that students learn nothing in school, only that they typically learn what the school does not intend to teach and do much less well with what the school focuses on. [...] A minimum use of the present analysis might then be to broaden educators' perspectives so that they will be aware of the possibilities of apprenticeship training that may be available to them. (pp. 103–104)

Similar viewpoints are connected with the loosely defined boundaries of the concept of *situated learning* and its 'multiple, theoretically generative interconnections with persons, activities, knowing, and world' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 121). When introducing the concept of *learning ecology framework*, Barron (2006) also emphasizes that 'structured social arrangements such as apprenticeships are often crucial learning contexts' in non-school environments (p. 197). Brown and Duguid (1996) propose that schools and places of work ought to make it possible for learners to participate legitimately and peripherally in authentic social practice. They introduce the concept of *stolen knowledge*, inspired by a story told by the Indian Nobel prize winner, author and musician Rabindranath Tagore [1861–1941] about his own musical learning:

A very great musician came and stayed in [our] house. He made one big mistake . . . determined to teach me music, and consequently no teaching took place. Nevertheless, I did casually pick up from him a certain amount of stolen knowledge. (Brown & Duguid, 1996, p. 47)

According to Brown and Duguid (1996), legitimate peripheral participation could be viewed as *legitimate theft*. Tagore 'stole' knowledge through listening to what the teacher played for his own pleasure, outside the lessons. In other words, *what is learnt is not restricted to what is taught*.

The term 'stolen knowledge' may perhaps appear potentially charged, a bit provocative even. I do not take it as a hint at issues of cultural appropriation. Rather, I understand Brown and Duguid's (1996) choice of this term as a playful attempt to direct attention to learners' *demand* perspective on learning, as opposed to teachers' *supply* perspective. Brown and Duguid advocate an increased research focus on learners' needs and preferences; hence

the term. It is an important educational goal, Brown and Duguid insist, to make these kinds of knowledge ‘theft’ possible through providing *windows onto practice*:

A demand-side view of this sort of knowledge theft suggests how important it is not to force-feed learning, but to encourage it, both provoking the need and making the resources available for people to ‘steal’. We regard this as the paradoxical challenges of encouraging and legitimating theft. (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 136)

The concept of stolen knowledge has found favour in literature on learning environments (Baets, 1998; Jonassen & Land, 2000; Baets & van der Linden, 2003). However, despite its origin in Tagore’s story about musical learning, it has not yet gained ground in music education research. I will argue that the concept of stolen knowledge relates in interesting ways to well-known examples of jazz musical learning which traditionally has included different ways of gaining knowledge from active musicians.

### Learning Jazz

The attitude that teaching and learning jazz improvisation is not only difficult but also a bit mysterious might be a rather common one. The British saxophonist Benny Green (1973) calls jazz ‘an elusive and highly demanding art [...] a game whose rules can never really be formulated’ (p. 132). Improvisational ability is commonly viewed as contextually dependent. According to Martin (2002), ‘[t]he specific skills required for musical improvisation [are] normal and achievable in appropriate cultural contexts’ (p. 140). Specifically, Berliner (1994) points out that ‘children who grow up around improvisers regard improvisation as a skill within the realm of their own possible development’ (p. 31).

Although he never employs the term ‘stolen knowledge’, the accounts in Berliner’s (1994) study of the learning of jazz improvisation seem to approach this concept remarkably often.

Even the young musician in a lengthy apprenticeship with a master artist-teacher supplements this training with various other learning opportunities. The jazz community’s traditional educational system places its emphasis on learning rather than teaching, shifting to students the responsibility for determining what they need to learn, how they will go about learning, and from whom. (p. 51)

Gioia (1988) points out that several famous jazz players and innovators exemplify jazz learning processes that relied heavily on their ‘apprenticeship at the gramophone’ (p. 67). Such listening practices still prevail in jazz learning; Johansen (2013b) provides an empirical study of the practice of copying from recordings in contemporary Norwegian jazz students’ instrumental practice.

The tension between imitation and creation constitutes a central educational dilemma in arts pedagogy. Perhaps all education needs to be founded on the supposition that there is a way to dissolve this seemingly paradoxical challenge. Liebman (1996) strongly advocates transcription and imitation as educational means for the jazz improviser to attain musical individuality: ‘all artists go through imitation’ (p. 17); ‘The inspirational effect of being

able to sound like the records being admired will spur the youngster on to find his own individuality' (p. 117).

Berliner (1994) presents samples of traditional frameworks for jazz musical learning, very much in line with the windows onto practice recommended by Brown and Duguid (1996), such as jam sessions and participation in orchestras. Activities such as jamming together, hanging out together and even living together with more experienced musicians are an important means of designing a window onto practice, making knowledge theft possible in this musical tradition. According to Prouty (2008), *self-teaching*, commonly perceived as essential to non-academic jazz traditions, will permit performers to determine their own aesthetic course. During the last half century, however, the role of nightclubs and jam sessions to jazz performance and learning has diminished dramatically. College-based programmes have replaced the traditional learning grounds for young jazz musicians as well as the primary professional homes of many jazz performers (Ake, 2010). Arguably, the changing contexts of jazz learning have had significant impact on *what* is being taught and learnt, and *how*. A discussion of these and related questions has started to grow in jazz literature during the last decades.

The concept of literacy is arguably an important aspect of this development. The complex processes of traditional learning of jazz improvisation depart significantly from Western art music practices, especially in relation to the employment of written scores (Small, 1987; Prouty, 2006). Historically, the concept of improvisation has been viewed as a troublesome one within musical academia. As a consequence of having been met by strong opposition in these contexts, jazz educators have created relatively codified systems for improvisational instruction (Prouty, 2008). In the view of several jazz scholars, certain features of jazz (e.g. chord/scale methods, structure, and sound) come more easily as objects of pedagogy than other aspects (Berliner, 1994; Lewis, 1996; Schwartz, 1996). As a consequence, the relationship between jazz 'theory' and jazz 'practice' may appear rather different in formal or informal learning environments.

According to Prouty (2012), jazz improvisation pedagogy can be either theory-based or practice-based. The viewpoint that theory gives rise to improvisational practice does not exclude the opposite perspective, that practice determines what will be regarded as theory. In Prouty's view, 'both of these viewpoints are valuable' (p. 63). Notwithstanding, one main tendency in jazz education has been directed towards theory-based pedagogies. Monson (2002) sums up an important development regarding educational content:

Since the 1960s, jazz pedagogy has been dominated by the chord–scale approach to jazz harmony. Improvisers learn to associate scales with particular chords, which then guide their note choices while improvising. (p. 123)

According to Liebman (1996), bebop music offers beneficent educational material because it 'necessitates instrumental technique, theoretical knowledge, a good fluent rhythmic feel and training of the ear' (p. 118). In the words of Bailey (1993), bebop is 'the pedagogue's delight' because of 'its susceptibility to formulated method'; however, he maintains that the original qualities of the music have been watered down as a consequence of 'standardized, non-personal' educational approaches to improvisation (pp. 49–50).

Jazz education in a global perspective is far from homogeneous and ought perhaps not to be summed up in simplified schemata. In many contexts, jazz educators are likely to be reasonably aware of the complexities of jazz performance and learning. For instance, Johansen (2013a), in an empirical study of contemporary Norwegian jazz students' instrumental practice, coins the term *explorational practice* to designate ways of practising – considered crucial by these students – that 'involve experimenting with musical conventions and instrument norms' (p. iv).

In legitimate peripheral participation there is 'very little observable teaching' (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 92). Language may often be of minor importance in the implicit knowledge of a profession, e.g. when knowledge is transferred through processes of cognitive apprenticeship (Nielsen and Kvale, 2000). Similarly, problems of verbalisation are at the core of Rabindranath Tagore's story about stealing knowledge. The terms *formal/informal* can be used with regard to learning situations and practices; or they may be used with regard to ways of learning. Folkestad (2006) points out that it may be important not to blur this distinction. He argues that in most learning situations both formal and informal aspects of learning are 'in various degrees present and interacting in the learning process' (p. 143). Furthermore, Folkestad argues, 'it is important to distinguish between *where* the learning/activity takes place on the one hand, and the *type and nature* of the learning process on the other hand' (p. 142). Classrooms are not authentic scenes for learning the jazz profession; as noted by Ekelund (1997), a classroom is the authentic scene for one profession only, namely, that of the teacher. Activities such as sitting in with professional bands and participating at jam sessions would, on the other hand, qualify as instances of interest-driven, self-initiated, boundary-crossing, and self-sustaining learning. Similarly, traditionally prevalent jazz learning activities such as jamming and hanging out with more experienced musicians qualify well as instances of *stealing knowledge* in the sense of Brown and Duguid (1996).

### Landscape of Learning

Ecological perspectives on learning, creativity, and musical meaning (Gibson, 1979/1986; Boyce-Tillman, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Barron, 2006) are clearly relevant to the study of how jazz improvisers and jazz improvisation learners draw on their situatedness in time (in social and musical tradition) and in space (in social and musical environment). Improvisers' experience of musical meaning is a matter of perceptual experience (Clarke, 2005); and their musical activities can be seen as results of perceptual information structured by the environment (Gibson, 1979/1986).

The concept of *didactic topology* has been coined by Aslaug Nyernes (2000, 2002), the Norwegian researcher in art didactics. In this section I will introduce the related but slightly different notion of a *landscape of learning* which, I will argue, may subsume several aspects of educational perspectives that are highly relevant to jazz improvisation: practice communities of situated learning, ecological perspectives, learning ecology frameworks, and stealing knowledge through windows onto practice. My reason for preferring the term 'landscape' rather than 'topology' (Nyernes, 2000) is to avoid connotations that may be overly focused on schematic interpretations, or perhaps too permeated by cognitivist

perspectives. The notion of landscape, in my understanding, may carry about the same scope of meaning as 'zone' according to Wasser and Bresler (1996):

... unsettled locations, areas of overlap, joint custody, or contestation. It is in a zone [or a landscape] that unexpected forces meet, new challenges arise, and solutions have to be devised with the materials at hand. The notion of zone [or landscape] implies dynamic processes of exchange, transaction, transformation, and intensity. (p. 13)

The term 'landscape' also relates to perspectives on cognitive apprenticeship and the learning resources afforded by the learners' environment, as well as to the concept of musical ecology, reflecting music's interrelations with a pluralist society (Nielsen & Kvale, 2000; Boyce-Tillman, 2004).

The main aim of a recent interview study with Swedish jazz musicians (Bjerstedt, 2014) was to clarify the ways in which the concept of *storytelling* is used by Swedish jazz practitioners. The means to achieve insights into this usage was by way of extensive open-ended interviews with fifteen musicians of national and international renown. In addition, this study sheds important light on the informants' views on jazz learning.

Some of the informants' statements on educational issues express a rather pessimistic outlook on the potential of formal jazz improvisation education. In their view, it needs to be complemented with apprenticeship learning (Nielsen & Kvale, 2000), such as learning through practice in a community (e.g. developing a professional identity through participation in a jazz band), learning between generations, learning between communities of practice (e.g. through musical interplay with older – and perhaps American – jazz musicians), as well as learning through imitating and identifying (e.g. analysing jazz recordings). Based on their own experiences, several informants adhere to the view that learning in communities of practice is indispensable to jazz improvisation, if musicians are to learn more than those things that are '*easy to teach*' within formal educational settings: for instance, *individuality*, *creativity*, and the ability to attain a '*storytelling*' quality in jazz improvisation. Furthermore, several interview statements emphasize learners' *demand* perspective, pointing to the importance of learning as a driving force for musical development, and to the need for *musical interplay* as a means of artistic *maieutics* or *automaieutics*.

Several informants agree that jazz education is probably marked by what is *easy to teach*. They believe that the chord/scale formulaic methods are likely to remain a popular approach in jazz pedagogy for several reasons: it is comparatively easy to verbalize and communicate, it is measurable to some degree, and it has come to be perceived as a stepping stone in improvisational instruction. Trumpeter Ann-Sofi Söderqvist contends that this focus leads to schematization and simplification. Saxophonist Roland Keijser thinks it may lead to an overly strong emphasis on theory, whereas sound may be neglected. Pianist/trombonist Ulf Johansson Werre points to the difficulties to design exercises based on the playing of an important and influential improviser such as Cannonball Adderley: 'To me he has the qualities I'm looking for [but it is] completely impossible to turn him into didactics'. Trumpeter Peter Asplund believes that jazz educators often put too much focus on rhythmical and harmonic aspects at the expense of what he understands as storytelling aspects (Bjerstedt, 2014, pp. 284–297).

The difficulty, or impossibility, to teach *individuality* or *creativity* is emphasized by several informants. Saxophonist Amanda Sedgwick says: 'You can't teach creativity, you know. You can only learn that in life.' Ann-Sofi Söderqvist, after mentioning the analyses and techniques a jazz teacher may be able to provide, continues: 'it's still up to the student to make something of it'. Peter Asplund suggests that 'input from theatre and literature' may facilitate jazz improvisation learning with regard to storytelling aspects (Bjerstedt, 2014, pp. 287–8).

These comments are in tune with the common view in literature that a '*storytelling*' *quality* in jazz improvisation may require much more far-reaching experience than the easy-to-teach aspects predominant in much current jazz pedagogy (Berliner, 1994; Oakland, 1998). Roland Keijser suggests that some ways of improvising may be too 'internal' in order to tell stories that will reach listeners: 'the person who tells the story can do it in a very internal way. [...] But otherwise, if it's a good story-teller who hasn't got stuck in that rather internal way of telling a story, then of course those who are sitting a bit further away from the centre, that is, the audience, can also appreciate the story' (Bjerstedt, 2014, p. 215).

With formulations closely related to the notion of learners' *demand* perspective, Amanda Sedgwick points out the importance of *learning as a driving force* for the jazz musician's development: 'I think this music is so cool, because it is so rich. It is so rich of so much. There is so much to learn. So rich harmonically and rhythmically. There is so much you can do, so much you can learn. [...] I also think you grow as a human being by seeking honestly for more knowledge' (Bjerstedt, 2014, p. 295).

Saxophonist Gunnar Lindgren makes use of *maieutics* as a metaphor for learning processes when he points to the often astounding musical development in musicians working with Miles Davis: 'When you ask those who have been shaped by Miles, "What did he teach you? What did he do to you?" they all reply, "Nothing. He let the baby come out [...] he had that openness."' Lindgren describes the jazz educator's task as a mission to deliver the individuality of every improviser: 'to draw out the artistic baby, whatever it looks like, that every human being carries [...] to feel the universe of that particular student [...] to help them the best you can' (Bjerstedt, 2014, p. 289).

Saxophonist Jonas Kullhammar does not find current Swedish jazz education good enough. He offers, and states reasons for, three recommendations for learning processes in jazz. In his opinion, technical practice ought to be less focused on and much more attention and work should be devoted to *musical interplay*.

Number one is to play together. Number two is to listen a lot, to concerts and records. And then, number three: to practice on your own. Music will never work without communication and listening. I don't know how many practice rooms I have passed, and I have been extremely impressed by how people have played – then when I heard them play together with others, it was completely meaningless. (Bjerstedt, 2014, p. 293)

I interpret these statements by Sedgwick, Lindgren and Kullhammar as clearly indicating a view on jazz improvisational learning in line with the notions of *stealing knowledge* in a *landscape of learning*.

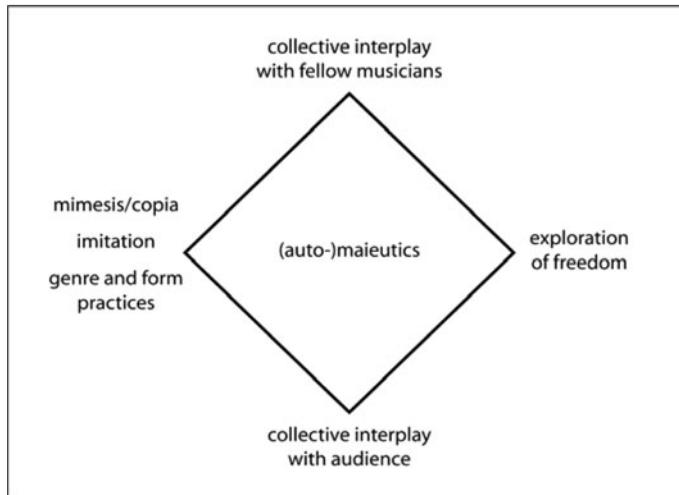


Figure 1. The landscape of jazz improvisation learning  
Temporality. Openness, wholeness, listening.

In brief, the multivariety of aspects involved in jazz teaching and learning emerges as an important result in Bjerstedt (2014). A *landscape model* (Figure 1) appears adequate in order to attempt to visualize this multivariety.

### The need for multidirectedness

The figure includes five parts. Nyernes's (2000, 2002) outline of didactic topology includes the concepts of *mimesis* and *copia*, pointing on one hand to the relation of knowledge to imitation, on the other hand to the supply of forms on all levels: from details to large structure; for instance, from vocabulary (such as 'jazz licks') to style (such as bebop). These dimensions correspond to the baggage of the traveller: to imitation and to genre and form practices. Arguably, they also correspond to the main contents of traditional and current formal jazz education.

Certain aspects of bebop, its formulae and its structures, lend themselves particularly well to systematization and are easily gradable (Bailey, 1993; Prouty, 2012). As a consequence, however, musical knowledge may be treated as individual, abstract, and relatively fixed, and improvisation may become a *search for mastery* rather than a *search for freedom*. If the improviser is a traveller, then there may be more things to explore than the highroad, and more things you need than the luggage and the map. In other words, imitation and genre practices are not enough. Based on the interview results in Bjerstedt (2014), it may be suggested that a landscape of learning (Figure 1) may include several other areas than imitation, and genre and form practices. In addition, other things emerge as essential: for instance, the improviser's *multi-directed relations* to fellow musicians and audience as well as, perhaps most importantly, the improviser's own *inner voice and vision*.

So, even though the other parts of the picture may be less prominent in formal jazz education, the interview statements above indicate that they are no less important to the jazz improviser. *Collective interplay with fellow musicians* as well as with an *audience*, of course, correspond to the view that the improviser must relate outwards continuously, to the fellow musicians and to the audience. *Maieutics* or *automaieutics* (cf. Bigelow, 1997; Ljungar-Chapelon, 2008), finally, corresponds to view that the improviser's inner voice and inner vision are at the centre of her task.

Arguably, it is crucial that a jazz improviser develop this *multi-directedness*; an improviser's attention is always (i) *directed*, never contained; (ii) directed in *multi-varied* ways, never in only one way. For lack of better words, such improvisational multi-directedness might be analysed as *self-directedness* (inner voice, inner vision); *context-directedness* (fellow musicians, audience); *text-directedness* (tradition, style, formulae, quotes); and *goal-directedness* (planning, structure).

### Didactic Loci

To make all these things the objects of formal education, to be sure, is not easy. In a general sense, the words of Small (1987) apply: 'there is not much point in practising alone what can only be done in a group' (p. 464). On the same note, Johansen's (2013a) findings point to the importance ascribed by jazz students to band practice as a learning arena for developing abilities specific to the interactive situation. Such multi-directedness – and, indeed, any multivariety of skills – would seem to call for a multivariety of *didactic loci*. The landscape model may be supplemented, in jazz learning practice, with yet another, very real, landscape which is, however, to be developed in its details on a local and individual level: the didactic loci of jazz improvisation. Arguably, faculties such as *text-directedness* and *goal-directedness* are comparatively suitable for the kinds of didactic loci that formal teaching may provide, while faculties such as *context-directedness* and *self-directedness* would seem to call for other or complementary forms of didactic loci.

I suggest that this multivariety of required skills is a main reason why jazz learning may have to rely on a rich learning ecology framework (Barron, 2006) that not only includes legitimate peripheral participation characterized by improvised practices and cognitive apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kvale & Nielsen, 2000) but also offers rich and multivariety opportunities to steal knowledge (Brown & Duguid, 1996). Reflections like these might possibly be developed into arguments against more orthodox manifestations of formal jazz education, in favour of both autodidactic learning cultures and more heterodox educational ideologies.

Several issues regarding jazz education call for further studies. First and foremost, based on the perspectives presented here, a change of focus from conceptual issues to 'real' issues is warranted. The notion of *didactic locus* may provide exactly this: a means to relate 'conceptual' perspectives on jazz improvisation (such as 'theft' or 'landscape') with concrete questions regarding suitable learning ecology frameworks. This notion may be considered a promising tool for further jazz educational study and thought. If the educational goal includes a healthy balance between artistic mastery and artistic freedom; and if learning the jazz tradition and musical craftsmanship is important, as well as

acquiring the ability to relate inwards to one's inner vision and articulate it musically, and the ability to relate outwards continuously in collective interplay with one's fellow musicians and one's audience – what combination of didactic loci, then, may be best suited to provide learning opportunities for all of these aims? This is an urgent topic for future educational studies and development.

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