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TO LOVE MUSIC, TO LOVE THE PIANO: 
ESTABLISHING ENABLING CONSTRAINTS IN 
PIANO INSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT
Establishing a love of music and of the piano is the goal of piano instructors. However, many of these students come with a passion for music gained through various listening and performing experiences. It, then, becomes part of the role of the teacher to implement the ideas that their students bring with them. This case study examines the practices of one piano teacher as she attempts to provide instruction that provides coherence, but also allows for sufficient space for random possibilities to emerge.

To love music, to love the piano—this is what most piano teachers would say when they asked what they want their students to achieve. Piano teachers want their students to love the piano as much as they do. However, what piano teachers enjoy about playing the piano, and even the types of music that they value, may be very different than their students' interests and intentions for pursuing piano instruction.

It is common for most piano teachers in Canada to have been trained through a Conservatory system, whereby western Classical music predominates. Instrumental training of this nature takes on a specialist role, as students are apprenticed into the performance practices of this genre. However, many students may not come with the same intention of wanting to be apprenticed into this specialized role. They have already begun their music training through listening, mostly, to other genres and perhaps would prefer to enhance their understanding of pop, jazz, or rock music. Students' interests and reasons for playing the piano may be vast, and the skills that are required are also variable. For example, some students may need to read a chord chart, improvise, or play by ear. They may want to be able to play at family weddings, or learn to sit down and play their favourite movie theme song. Other students may be more interested in winning concerto
competitions, Kiwanis festival, and receiving First Class Honours on their annual piano exams.

Private instrumental instruction such as piano instruction is not guided by standardized curricula. Teachers are expected to develop a program to suit the needs of their students. Traditionally, in Canada, many teachers and parents do rely on a Conservatory system to structure instruction. The Conservatory system has a long history in this country and is highly regarded as setting high standards for young musicians. The Conservatory system centers on the transmission of classical repertoire and related technical skills. Recently, there have been measures taken to expand the scope of repertoire selection to include more jazz and popular music, but, by and large, the emphasis remains on Classical music. However, since the curricula are not mandatory, piano teachers are at liberty to design their own curriculum.

Little research examines how piano teachers go about structuring their piano curricula and how they vary educational aims according to their students. Further, most research in piano pedagogy centers around American and/or British piano instructors, and little research has examined Canadian piano pedagogues. Therefore, the purpose of this research study was to examine how a piano teacher goes about structuring piano curricula and how a piano teacher balances the perceived needs of students with her own ideas of what should be part of piano instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I examine literature related to piano performance and pedagogy, specifically exploring research related to piano technique, piano practice, and piano pedagogy.

Performance and Piano Pedagogy

Research into instrumental instruction, such as piano instruction, has examined various components associated with performance. Piano techniques, such as how pianists execute playing legato, maintaining speed, producing various articulations along with a consideration of the use of the fingers, wrists and arms have been the subject of much discussion (e.g., Bernstein, 1991; Taubmann & Golandsky, 2000). Recently, investigations into performance related injuries have also been explored (e.g., Branfonbrener & Kjelland, 2002). Other issues, such as practicing
the piano in terms of frequency and content have been examined by a number of researchers (Hallam, 1995; 1998; Miklaszewski, 1989; Renwick and McPherson, 2002).

In addition to their own experiences as musicians, professional resources are available for piano teachers, offering insights into teaching experiences and providing readers with a list of strategies that have they have applied successfully (e.g., Johnston, 2002).

There is also a growing body of knowledge profiling instrumental teachers (e.g., Davidson & Jordan, 2007; Gaut, 2008; Jorgensen, 1986; Kennell, 2002). Jorgensen conducted case studies of 15 piano teachers in London, England, and found that many viewed either technique or repertoire to be of primary importance in piano lessons. Some had a set of list of pieces, primarily western-classical, that their students learned.

A recent case study conducted by Gaut (2008), consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews with 20 instrumental teachers providing instruction to upper-level students in a British conservatoire. Perceptions of the teachers' purposes for teaching, processes of teaching and learning, and relationships with their students were elucidated. From these conversations, Gaut found that the teachers learned how to teach 'on the job' relying on their own experiences as learners. Teachers felt that it was their duty to 'transmit' their knowledge of technique and repertoire to their students, with the intention of the students becoming a well-trained classical musician.

These findings have provided many insights into piano performance and pedagogy. However, the underlying premise of this work suggests that private piano instruction largely follows an apprenticeship model, where the students aim to become like the teacher in terms of their technical abilities and the repertoire that they are able to play (Davidson & Jordan, 2007; Gaut, 2008; Hallam, 1998).

Piano teachers, then, must balance their knowledge of piano playing, the repertoire that they would like to the student to play, as well as the intentions that the student brings to their music experience. Given the diversified experiences of children and teachers, studies are needed that examine how teachers go about establishing learning environments for their students. And while there is a body of research that examines the perceptions of piano
teachers, this research does not provide in-depth insights into the process that piano teachers undergo as they establish and vary their piano curriculum. There is also a need to examine the perceptions of piano teachers who may not pursue music as a career choice, for whom a mentorship model of instruction, where students strive to like their teacher, may not be appropriate.

One way to do this is through case study, which allows for in-depth investigation of a phenomenon. What follows are the findings of an exploratory case study (Yin, 2003) profiling the experiences of Karina, a piano teacher in Ontario, Canada who provides instruction to 45 students aged six to eighteen.

I met Karina in a piano pedagogy course where we were both studying. I selected her for this case study as an example of an established full-time Canadian piano teacher. Karina was selected as a popular piano teacher in her area because she has been established for many years and her current teaching load is full with a waiting list, and she has also pursued advanced training in piano pedagogy. She is typical of many full-time piano teachers who have been trained from a young age and pursued music in university in order to establish an independent studio providing instruction to a wide variety of young students.

After receiving ethical clearance from the Education Research Ethics Board (EREB) of Queen's University, I invited Karina to take part in the research. She and I met initially for a 30 minute interview, during which time she read the Letter of Information and signed a Consent Form. We met for a 45 indepth interview in her studio and follow-up questions were asked via e-mail. The interview was transcribed verbatim and analyzed the data using Atlas.ti (Muhr, 2007). Analysis was conducted using open-coding and resultant codes were grouped into themes that were guided by relevant literature. Triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple researchers.

Through this narrative, constructed from the analyzed interview, we discover how this teacher establishes enabling constraints for her students, combining the ideas about music and education that she, as well as her pupils, brings to the piano lesson. To analyze the data I relied on the theoretical framework of enabling constraints as outlined by Davis (2004) and David and Sumara (2006).

Enabling Constraints
Enabling constraints serves as a theoretical framework for examining and analyzing the case study. In using the word 'structure' in this research question, I do not mean the word structure to refer to a fixed entity, like a building or machine whose boundaries are impenetrable; rather it describes an organic body, such as an ecosystem, that allows for shifts and changes while retaining coherence. Many learning environments and learners have been likened to a machine, which implies that they are complicated systems—mechanical networks with inert parts, (Davis, 2004). However, this type of analysis does not consider that multiple responses that are possible as people react to various stimuli. Conversely, Davis and Sumara (2006) refer to enabling constraints as a structure (often considered a part of a complex environment). Enabling constraints are necessary because they allow a system to remain viable as new ideas are able to emerge (enabling), while a common goal remains (constraints). These controls are not strict rules or laws, but rather consist of negotiations among the agents to balance the need for coherence while still allowing for emergence.

What follows are the accounts of how Karina supports the needs of her students through her use of physical space and various lesson components. The rapport that she strives to develop with each of her students is also examined.

EXAMINING ENABLING CONSTRAINTS
Lesson Environment as an Enabling Constraint

As I enter Karina's studio, I am struck by the warmth and friendliness that this converted storage room in a public school evokes. In addition to the upright piano that is the focal point of the studio, Karina has furnished the room with large cushioned chairs and a coffee table. The room feels cozy and inviting; there is enough space for moving around and having others attend the lesson. The repertoire books, electric keyboard, charts on the wall are some of the resources at her disposal that have been purposefully placed in the studio. Our interview began with Karina telling me about how she became a piano teacher. "When I was eight my parents received a piano even though neither of them could play it, but I was mesmerized. I could choose one after-school activity, so I could either continue dance lessons, or begin piano lessons. There was no question; I wanted to play the piano."
Sitting in the red chair Karina's face relaxed as she travelled back in memory; "I had three teachers before going to university to study music. These teachers were concerned with maintaining their own reputation." She explained that, "you were a result of their reputation. Hopefully you would enjoy music, but that was not a part of the process. Learning the piano was more about rigor, discipline and that when you played, sounded good to others." Karina looked around her studio before continuing, "The repertoire you played was Conservatory-based and you were expected to register for exams and compete in competitions. You were their students and they made sure that you didn't tarnish their reputation. I wanted to please them, I worked hard and I survived."

This piano-lesson environment includes both the teacher as well as the physical space in which she teaches. Karina has turned an old storage room into a rich and warm learning environment. It is evident that Karina has taken special care in furnishing her studio considering the atmosphere that she wants to evoke as well as filling her studio with resources that can offer many possibilities to students. This attention to the physical space demonstrates Karina's understanding that the lesson setting has the potential to impose constraints on the learning activities and set the tone for instruction (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Upitis, 2004) and therefore, Karina has taken care to create an environment that evokes inspiration and support.

Karina's affection for the piano is evident in her immediate desire to learn the piano after her parents acquired one. However, her story of tolerating the rigor and strictness is not unlike many other piano students endure lessons constrained by requirements that their well-meaning teachers have placed on them. The memories of these students suggest that their teachers value the music and maintain high performance standards which mean promoting the discipline that one achieves when they strive to perfect each piece. The adherence to the examination requirements might reflect a faith in the exam system, and that its incremental and well laid-out process would result in the creation of a cultured pianist just as it did for them. This trust in such a system underlies an assumption that teaching is a complicated system, based on knowledge transmission, where the teachers' role is to impart the knowledge of the field, as they believe it to be, to their pupils (Davis, 2004). And in these cases, the previous
musical experiences of the students may have little bearing on the instruction that they receive. This type of environment, which seems similar to the one that Karina encountered as a student, has served many young pianists well, and, in a certain ways, Karina is one of them, having developed sufficient skills from this process to gain entrance into a university music program. However, this success does not always occur, and in fact this process may be too confining for others, who may not want to pursue music in a university program. Karina may see the benefits of this system in which she herself succeeded, but may also be cognizant of the fact that some of her students may be hoping to become a pianist within a different musical culture. Therefore, to what extent do teachers adhere to various exam requirements? With this in mind, I asked Karina, what components she included in their lessons, and if and how she incorporated various exam system requirements in her teaching.

Lesson Structure as an Enabling Constraint

"If you'd asked me that question ten years ago, almost all of them would go [to exams]." Karina answers. "But now, I've decided not to send them anymore, unless they ask. I don't like to use a standard series, but prefer to fit their lessons and the methods to them," she explains. "What I put emphasis on, depends more on the child then on a fixed curriculum. However, there are components that I like to include in every lesson such as repertoire, sight reading, and technique and I like to provide several performance opportunities. But what is contained in each of those components is varied according to the student. Each student has different interests and piano serves a different place in each of my students' lives, so what goes into the lessons can be variable. I try to always remember that ultimately I want my students to love music and the piano, so I try to give them the skills that I think they'll need in a vehicle that works for them."

Karina hasn't completely abandoned the structure outlined by the exam process, but has rather enlarged its holdings to suit more of her students' needs and interests. Students still practice repertoire, but rather than being confined to the prescribed pieces of a syllabus, students are free to choose, in consultation with Karina, a variety of repertoire that either suits or stretches their interests. Similarly, she provides opportunities to develop various skills associated with piano performance such as technique and
sight reading. It seems that Karina views teaching in more organic terms; information from other agents in the learning system can bring forth ideas to the lesson (Davis, 2004). This is not to say that her teaching is completely random, rather it is guided by her adherence to enhancing her students' love of music and love of piano and the realization that this may not look the same for each child.

This sense of structure binds her piano instruction as she attempts to provide opportunities to enhance students' understanding of various types of music, as well as develop skills that will help them with this challenge. In other words, if the process does not lead to a love of music and the piano, then Karina does not use that process in the student's lesson. While Karina relies on her experiences as a musician and teacher, she applies them within the context of facilitating a love of music and a love of piano, rather than using her experiences as a list of practices that will suit all her students in the same way as they did her. This attitude helps to frame all of her ideas and helps her to make decisions accordingly. This is a process that Karina has found successful and, given that her students and parents are engaged and that she has a waiting list of students wanting her instruction, the students and parents agree. Wanting to understand more, I was curious to know if there are other aspects of music that she includes in her lessons that are not traditionally associated with piano instruction, specifically that of composition and improvisation.

"[A]s soon as I sense a minute, tiny little show of them wanting to compose, I take it and run. The student will play it, I'll give them suggestions, and I'll maybe use that opportunity to show form," she says. "[I want to help them] get in control of their piece to get them play it effectively to get them to transmit it—to think about their musical ideas.... I do not focus on improvisation with them, although it is a good idea, but then we might need two lessons," she laughs.

Composition and improvisation do not have a permanent place in the lesson structure, but Karina does support the exploration of composition if the students present a morsel of interest. In this way she is responsive to the students' interests, thus allowing this experimentation to come to the forefront of the lesson structure while also trying to embed others ideas (e.g.,
technical gestures, dynamic nuance, form) through this process. Researchers have advocated for the importance of composition in music education (Swanwick, 2000; McPherson, 2006), however, it is rarely included as a component of instrumental instruction (McBride Smith, 2000; Swanwick, 1988). In Karina's case, she may be striving to accommodate her students beyond what her own formal training has provided. Karina received a traditional music and piano education, remaining in the classical realm, and although many bachelors' programs in music require some sort of composition (e.g., composing fugues or minuets as part of theory classes) composition and improvisation may be an area in which Karina is not well-versed. Realizing that it is important to help students foster the interests that they bring to their lesson, she tries, nonetheless, to support these aspects to the extent that she feels able.

It is evident to me, from the smile that radiates from her as she speaks of her students, that Karina's passion for her students has driven many of her pedagogical changes. I wondered what her thoughts were around establishing relationships with students.

Rapport as an Enabling Constraint

The warmth in Karina's smile was echoed in her words, "[I hope that my students and I can develop] a long-term relationship that has an emotional connection," Karina explained. "I feel privileged to be an important person in their life as they're growing. I see them from the time they're six to the time they're sixteen and it's a really wonderful thing. I learn a lot about being human when I teach...and I hope is such that when they think back to their piano lessons it brings a smile to their face."

Perhaps the warmth and encouragement that Karina exudes is the most significant enabling constraints in her curriculum. You can imagine, when listening to her, that connecting with her students and supporting them is at the forefront of her pedagogical practices. The idea of having a warm relationship as a motivator for learning has been well documented in many studies (e.g., Davidson, Howe & Sloboda, 1997; McPherson & Davidson, 2006). In Karina, we see that the relationship she develops with her students is more than a creating a motivation to learn, it influences the structures and curricular decisions as well. Based on my own experiences as a piano student and teacher, I believe knowing that their teacher has their best
interests at heart is the most significant enabling constraint as it provides a structure for students to depend upon. This sense of security may allow students to trust in the advice of their teacher and to take more risks and may also increase students' confidence in expressing their own ideas and interests during the lesson. The rapport Karina establishes with her students suggests that she and her students are embarking on a shared project of fostering a love of music and a love of piano.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENABLING CONSTRAINTS

Rapport, lesson and environment are three of the enabling constraints identified in Karina's piano pedagogy. The development of these enabling constraints has occurred because of her reflection on theory and practice over a process of time. Insights gained from her experiences as a learner and teacher have guided curriculum decision-making while allowing the making of these decisions to be part of a fluid process. This process is guided by the enabling constraints that Karina has established. In her curricula, she strives to maintain a delicate balance between sufficient coherence to orient [students'] actions and sufficient randomness to allow for flexible and varied response (Davis & Sumara, 2006). Her studio was structured in such a way that the piano is first and foremost present, yet there is sufficient room to explore music through movement and there is room, too, for the many resources to support other activities that will enhance musical development. The components of Karina's syllabi are largely similar to that found in many exam syllabi, however, within each of these components there is space for exploration. For some, this may include preparing for an exam. For others, their lesson components include pieces from a variety of genres, and technical skills that do not fall within traditional examination requirements. This allows emergent possibilities to be pursued, while grounding the student in what Karina believes to be a solid foundation.

Karina allows for her learning and teaching experiences to impact her piano curriculum, which has grown recursively throughout her career. Evidence of her growth is seen most prominently through her change in the use of the examination system. Although examinations are commonly used in piano instruction, her decision not to use them came as result of
observing the students as well as reflecting on her own practices. Rather, she uses her own professional judgement based on her own musical experiences and her students' interests. She has enlarged the understanding of ways one can learn to love music and love the piano.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Karina's practices have been developed based on her experiences as a teacher, student, and musician. Remnants of her musical experiences are evident in the components that she chooses to illuminate in her lessons and as her sensitivity to individual needs. Ideas from her teaching experiences of the past are infused within her lesson structure. Karina is not interested in having her students become like her; rather, she is interested in her students facilitating their own love of music. Although traditional components remain part of the lessons that Karina teaches (e.g., technique, sight reading), these skills are contextualized to the previous experiences, and to the interests of the students. This fusion has allowed for the love of music and the love of the piano to emerge in an interesting balance of the notions that are brought to the piano lesson by both Katrina and her students.

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