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Creativity in three one-to-one videoed piano lessons in Chinese higher education institutions

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Abstract

This research focuses on contemporary piano pedagogy in the one-to-one lesson in higher music education institutions in mainland China. This qualitative study focuses on three video-recorded lessons in which creativity was evaluated through analysing teaching approach, teaching strategy, teaching content and student behaviour. The master-apprentice teaching approach was demonstrated in all lessons; these were teacher-directed, showing unequal relationship status between teacher and student, and minimal dialogue involving the students' own ideas. The findings also show that the students were learning through imitation and obeying directives. Although some creative performances occurred, these were first created by the teachers and then conveyed to their students; this might imply a reproductive creativity rather than the development of students' individual creativity. This may have implications for the development of student independence in relation to expressive and interpretative creativity.

Key words

creative piano pedagogy, higher education, video analysis technology, Jian Ying, MAXQDA

Introduction

Studies have been conducted on teachers' and students' perceptions of creativity and creative teaching (de Souza Fleith, 2000) and creativity in music education and higher education (Burnard & Haddon, 2015; Haddon & Burnard, 2016; MacDonald, Byrne & Carlton, 2006). Scholars in mainland China have likewise begun to realise the importance of cultivating students' creativity (Yi, Plucker & Guo, 2015), examining how Confucian ideology influences creativity (Niu, 2012) and conducting comparative studies on creativity (Niu & Kaufman, 2013). Running parallel to this, the Chinese government has announced new educational initiatives aimed at fostering creativity, while academics in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2012, 2013, 2016) and Taiwan (Horng et al., 2005; Lin, 2009, 2011) have conducted research on the characteristics of creative instructors and creative teaching practices.

Research undertaken by Niu and Sternberg (2006) indicates that the Chinese tend to regard creativity as having 'social and moral values' (p. 18), a finding that may be linked to collectivism in society and culture. Doing something creative and unusual may run the risk of alienating others, suggesting that a society with a collectivist culture might be detrimental to the growth of creativity. In addition, Chinese creativity is not always associated with novelty, instead 'making a connection between the new and the old' (Niu & Sternberg, 2006, p. 18). This is supported by Fung (2017), who discusses how Confucius – who believed that examining the known is necessary for discovering new perspectives [*wengu er zhixin*, 温故而知新], implying that creativity is founded on past knowledge and experience, and thus 'an

established frame of reference' (Fung, 2017, p. 148) – may have influenced music education. In Zheng and Leung's (2021a) empirical study, knowledge and experience also emerge as two major characteristics associated with creativity. As Fung (2017) explains, without a frame of reference a piece of music cannot be composed; likewise, a new teaching approach cannot be implemented without the necessary theory. However, while knowledge and experience effectively combine to constitute the concept of expertise (Amabile, 1998), the other two components of creativity discussed by Amabile, motivation and creative thinking skills, have received considerably less attention in China.

Yan (2014) believes that creativity promotes students' individual growth, and that creative teaching is a vital component of music education that should be encouraged. However, the Chinese educational system is deeply influenced by examination-oriented structures (Mullen, 2017). The traditional style of teaching music in China is teacher-centred: teachers deliver knowledge to their pupils, and pupils imitate their teachers; this appears to apply not only in school classes, but also in one-to-one instrumental tuition in China (Guo & Xu, 2015). This teaching method does not emphasise learners' emotions in music (Burwell, 2016), along with providing little room for developing students' creativity (Guo & Xu, 2015). Research on fostering students' creativity and strengthening creative teaching practices in music education, particularly within piano pedagogy, is limited and elementary (Zheng & Leung, 2021b). The current research addresses this situation, analysing three videoed piano

lessons that took place at three tertiary level music departments.

Methodology

A paradigm is defined as ‘a whole system of thinking’ (Neuman, 2007, p. 96). Two research paradigms are frequently applied in the field of social science research: the social constructivism paradigm, and the interpretive paradigm. Social constructivism is concerned with the historical, cultural, and contextual relevance of the environments in which individuals work and live, understanding what happens in society and constructing knowledge through this information (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). In other words, what individuals perceive and experience in the social environment is created socially. Creswell & Creswell indicated that social constructivists believe that ‘individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work, and individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences’ (p. 8). Furthermore, there is a ‘complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas’ (ibid.). In other words, all the participants’ views or beliefs are seen as valid by the researcher. Interpretivism emphasises that knowledge is constructed through people’s experiences and perceptions (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), which the researcher seeks to understand. The interpretivist paradigm tends to be inclusive, implying the potential for numerous realities instead of a single reality.

Research methods

With the aim of investigating creativity in one-to-one piano lessons in the Chinese higher education context, this paper reports selected data and findings from a case study carried out by the first author. Case study research is defined as ‘an in-depth examination of an extensive amount of information about very few units or cases for one period or across multiple periods of time’ (Neuman, 2007, p. 42). This may involve various research methods; Thomas (2013) indicates that observation, in which the researcher obtains access to a group, and then watches and listens to what those in the group, such as teachers and students, say and do, is a significant method for gathering data in social science. In the present study, the first author used video to aid the observation process. Video recording is being used increasingly in educational research (Pirie, 1996) as a significant means for recording human interaction, since it enables the researcher to gain a detailed understanding of the context and to carry out detailed analysis (Roschelle & Goldman, 1991; Suchman & Trigg, 1992). The advantage of using video recording is that it can ‘capture a social scene far more quickly than taking field notes’ (Thomas, 2013, p. 224). The researcher can also gather various perspectives of an activity, such as complex behavioural data (Roschelle & Goldman, 1991). Daniel (2006) has demonstrated that in instrumental teaching and learning, detailed analysis of student-teacher interaction and diverse teaching strategies can be accomplished via video analysis.

With regard to the present study, the first author recorded three piano lessons and analysed them from several perspectives in ways that demonstrated ‘interactions between teachers and

students, teaching strategies, teaching roles, learning opportunities presented to students and learning experiences provided for students' (Daniel, 2006, p. 192), as well as pupil behaviours. These aspects can help understand how the teacher-student relationship operates in one-to-one teaching within the Chinese higher music education context, what creative teaching strategies may apply, and how the teacher-student relationship might affect creative pedagogies.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of York, UK. Information and consent forms were distributed to potential participants; these were presented in Chinese and stated the aims and objectives of the research, the methods of data collection, the issue of anonymity, how the data would be stored and used, and the risks or benefits of taking part in the research. Participants were informed that involvement would have no detrimental consequences or potential benefits, and that there would be no consequences if they decided to withdraw at any point.

To limit the possibility of disrupting teacher-student interaction, the first author was invited to sit in the corner of the teaching room by each of the three teachers and to operate the recording equipment (the first author's iPad). After each lesson, the first author asked the teacher and the student to again confirm whether they were happy for the recording to be used in the study. Each person indicated their willingness for the first author to use and

analyse the video and confirmed that the lesson had followed their normal routine.

Data Analysis

The software Jian Ying [剪映] was used by the first author to analyse the videoed lessons. After being uploaded, captions were manually added in both Chinese and English for each lesson; the second author reviewed them to ensure that the captions were understandable to a native English speaker before transferring the captions to 'Word' documents as transcripts in order to calculate word counts. Additionally, MAXQDA was employed to produce codes for teaching methods and teaching foci by uploading lesson transcripts, quantifying the number of times the teacher concentrated on technique, expression, elements of the music score, or other areas. The teachers and students who took part in the lessons will be referred to using the following numbering: Lesson A took place with T1 and S1; Lesson B with T2 and S2, and Lesson C with T3 and S3. The main goal of the study was to analyse the process of teaching and learning in order to improve understanding of how one-to-one piano teaching is delivered in Chinese higher education institutions. Each of the three lessons will be examined separately before being discussed together in the 'Conclusions' section.

Findings

Lesson A

Lesson A took place inside a practice room in a Music Conservatory in China. S1 was

studying piano performance; at the time of the research, he was a Year 3 student preparing for his first term final piano exam.

Teaching approach

The lesson began with S1's performance of the work that had been practised, the teacher providing feedback on various elements. Comments were frequently made in response to errors in S1's performance. T1 started the dialogue with an exploratory question, 'When you practise on your own, what do you think about?' While this opening suggests a mentor-friend rather than master-apprentice relationship, T1 later asked numerous rhetorical questions, such as: 'I told you before that you need to pedal first, didn't I?' and 'This is where you can immerse yourself, isn't it?' Previous research has advocated for the use of exploratory questions as the best way to stimulate students' active participation (Burwell, 2005). By contrast, rhetorical questions serve as a model for the learner (ibid). In this case, the frequent use of 'isn't it?' at the end of the teacher's statements seems to require the learner to agree rather than disagree. As a result, although both exploratory and rhetorical questions are used, the emphasis on the rhetorical serves to reiterate the authority of the master.

Within instrumental lessons, the proportion of student talk to teacher talk, as well as the quantity and types of questions being asked, can significantly indicate the type of teaching approach favoured (Young, Burwell & Pickup, 2003). In Lesson A, the student's contribution was minimal; they learned through the teacher's instructions and comments. Consequently,

the teaching approach in this lesson was considered to be consistent with the master-apprentice format, whereby the teacher is viewed as a model of imitation and source of knowledge, and the student learns through the teacher's instruction (Jørgensen, 2000).

Teaching content

The focus of Lesson A was on reproducing a Chopin Nocturne from the written score. Most of the time was devoted to technique, followed by reproduction of the musical score and musical expression. Technique-oriented issues appeared 55 times, the most frequent aspects being related to dynamics (17 times) and speed (11 times), followed by pedalling, articulation, phrasing, and rhythm. Moreover, although T1 was very strict in terms of requiring S1 to play according to the marks on the score, there were only five instances where musical expression was emphasised. The specific teaching strategies that were applied are discussed in the next section.

Teaching strategy

Several strategies, such as imagery, metaphor, demonstration, and directive teaching, in which the student followed the teacher's instructions, were demonstrated in Lesson A. For example, T1 used imagery to illustrate how a specific section should be expressed by stating: 'It seems like the door will open, so I must go out and find something that I long for; that's how this [harmonic] tendency, [it] needs to be expressed'. Metaphors were frequently used to support musical expression. For example, one of the teacher's metaphors for a section was

mournfulness: 'It's starting to get rather sad here, isn't it?' However, the most frequently-used teaching strategy was demonstration, typically accompanied by explanation. Sometimes, explanations were followed by demonstrations; at other times, demonstrations were followed by explanations. Demonstrations were of two types: those on the piano and those presented through gestures. Directive teaching, where T1 gave simple and short instructions and the student followed what the teacher indicated, occurred multiple times during the video. S1 mostly responded by playing according to T1's directives, rather than offering verbal reactions.

The evaluation of student performance is an important aspect of instrumental music teaching and is linked to effective teaching (Mills & Smith, 2003; Zhukov, 2012). Both positive and negative feedback can be divided into general and specific comments. For example, 'yes', 'right', and 'much better' can be viewed as generally positive feedback, particularly if followed by a specific reason or explanation (Zhukov, 2012). In Lesson A, S1's performance appeared to elicit positive comments from T1 in the form of remarks such as 'It's not bad' (5:43), 'It was good just now' (15:30) and 'Yes, good, good, good' (17:08). However, what exactly was considered to be good was notable by its omission.

Pupil behaviour

S1's behaviour showed several characteristics, with a primary emphasis on positively engaging throughout the lesson, as well as listening closely to T1's instructions and

demonstrations. In addition, S1 often nodded to indicate agreement with T1, made eye contact, and looked at T1's hands when she demonstrated, together with following the score and asking questions or responding to T1's questions. The pace of the lesson was moderate; while T1 spoke quickly, S1 was given the opportunity to reflect, answer, and ask questions.

Lesson B

Lesson B was conducted at a piano inside a practice room of a Normal University¹. At the time of the research, S2 was a first-year student preparing for the final exam of the first term. T2 is a young piano teacher who has been teaching at this particular university for several years.

Teaching approach

On five occasions during the course of the lesson, S2 asked T2 for clarification about an aspect of the latter's instructions. However, T2 did not follow up with any questions to inspire S2 to think and help S2 take responsibility for her own learning. Instead, it appeared that T2 was used to being viewed as the authority figure, while S2 appeared to receive knowledge passively, suggesting a strong master-apprentice relationship.

Teaching content

The three pieces played by S2 included a contemporary Chinese piece, '*Colourful clouds*

¹ A Normal University is one which focuses on teacher-training

chasing the moon' [*Caiyun zhui yue*, 彩云追月] by Jianzhong Wang, a Chopin Ballade and a Haydn Sonata in F Major. The observed instruction focused on the Chinese repertoire and the Haydn sonata, covering fingering, pedalling, phrasing, dynamics and musical expression. Frequent topics of instruction in Lesson B included those relating to technique, which occurred 64 times, and those covering notation and expression, which occurred nine and three times, respectively. Therefore, it can be seen that the teaching content was strongly technique related.

Teaching strategy

Directive teaching was frequently employed in Lesson B. Verbal directives were aimed at developing S2's performance according to T2's understanding of the music, using shushing to encourage a quieter dynamic and finger clicking to emphasise pulse / speed. Singing was also employed by T2 while S2 was playing in order to indicate aspects such as speed, dynamics and musical expression. In addition to demonstrating finger technique and dynamics on the piano, T2 indicated, through performing, that the performance should be more passionate, saying: 'Get a little riled up'. However, since this was played at a speed that S2 could not yet master, this was perhaps intended to be more in the way of motivation. Either way, the demonstration seemed to have little influence on S2's performance during the lesson. There were a few brief instances of praise from T2, but they did not seem to be precise. For instance, T2 did not state what was good and how it was good when the student had finished playing,

stating instead: 'Overall, much better than the last lesson. Good, good, let's start from the beginning'. After S2 finished her first performance, T2 said: 'OK, good. Let's start with these. Let's start again from the beginning'. As a result, T2's compliments seemed to be only general, perhaps motivational, but neither full nor informative.

Pupil behaviour

Overall, S2 participated positively throughout the lesson. The student spent the majority of the time attending to T2's talk, directives and demonstrations, contributing and responding by nodding, establishing eye contact with T2, and generally demonstrating awareness and active engagement. The general pace of Lesson B was rapid; T2 spoke immediately after S2 made errors and expected S2 to correct the errors after the lesson on her own if she was unable to do so during their time together. As with the previous example, the lesson appeared to be strongly embedded in a master-apprentice teaching model.

Lesson C

Lesson C took place in a university teacher's practice room with T3 and S3. At the time of the research, S3 was a Year 3 student studying piano as her main instrument; T3 had many years' teaching experience at this particular institution.

Teaching approach

T3's speech accounted for 1,861 words, or 99.8 percent, of the total word count, based on the transcription of the lesson. As further evidence of a highly dominant master-apprentice

relationship, this teacher only used questions to confirm whether the student had understood or not before going straight on to the following point. Since the student was not afforded enough time to respond, this might indicate that T3 was indifferent to whether the student understood or not, or else that they had become used to silence from the student. Either way, no form of dialogue was evident.

Teaching content

S3 played Etude Op. 299, no. 5 by Czerny in the lesson, a work set for the student's Year 3 piano exam. The teaching content tended to be technique-oriented. As a result, technique-related themes featured 16 times, whereas practice-related themes appeared eight times.

Teaching strategy

In Lesson C, T3's most common teaching strategy was modelling. The reason might be that T3 had a piano of her own (there were two upright pianos in the practice room), or it could simply have been as a result of T3 believing that modelling was the most efficient way for S3 to learn. There were also five instances of student-teacher collaboration, which consisted of S3 and T3 playing together on separate pianos, rather than S3 playing one hand and T3 supplying the other part. In addition, directive teaching was employed at several points, and there were also a few instances of the use of the metaphor strategy.

In Lesson C, T3 used more specific positive feedback, and there were more instances

where compliments were given than in either of the previous two lessons, e.g., ‘Um, good. The completeness is good’ and ‘That’s what I just told you about doing *crescendo*, you did well’. Overall, T3 was relatively positive and encouraging in her evaluation of S3’s performance.

Pupil behaviour

S3 listened attentively to T3’s speaking and playing, establishing eye contact and looking at T3’s hands. In addition, the student added markings to the score and silently imitated T3’s playing several times. Overall, the lesson was conducted at a moderate tempo; T3’s pacing enabled S3 to attempt individual sections more than once and (to) play at a speed which was the most comfortable for her.

Discussion

The analysis of the piano lessons in this study explored teaching approaches, teaching strategy, teaching content, and pupil behaviour. The master-apprentice model was demonstrated in all three lessons, which were teacher-directed; as such, they revealed an unequal relationship status between teacher and student and minimal dialogue involving the students’ own ideas. As indicated by Luo (2018), piano education at the higher education level in China is mostly didactic in style. Carey et al. (2013) define this as transfer pedagogy. Since teachers place the focus on the outcome rather than the process, this type of teaching has a tendency to make students more reliant on their tutors and take less ownership of their

own learning. With the exception of a few teacher-student interactions in Lesson A, there was very little verbal communication between students and teachers, and relatively few opportunities for the students to speak, other than to answer questions. The students appeared to be in a relatively passive position, learning through imitation and instruction. Dialogue between the teachers and the students was infrequent.

Questioning techniques seemed to be largely overlooked by the teachers in all three lessons. Even where they were in evidence, these inquiries tended to be closed questions, and the dialogue did not appear to be an equal discussion that respected the students' ideas. Allsup and Baxter (2004) emphasise the significance of asking more open-ended questions and the role of dialogue in music lessons, since students can gain additional knowledge. Kassner (1998) believed that skilled questioning could stimulate students' higher-level thinking, promoting their own evaluative capabilities.

It can be seen that the teacher in Lesson A (conservatory) used slightly more varied teaching strategies than the others. There appeared to be more verbal communication between T1 and S1, although this might be due to the longer duration of this lesson (33 minutes, compared to 27 minutes and 19 minutes for the others, respectively). A common feature of all three lessons was the instructive approach of pointing out immediately where the students had made mistakes. This is in line with the findings of previous research; for example, Yeh (2018) indicated that piano teachers in their study mostly focused on analysing students'

playing mistakes in one-to-one lessons.

The data analysis revealed the use of a variety of teaching methods, including imagery, metaphor, demonstration, directive teaching, and student-teacher cooperation. However, where there were two pianos in the classroom, the teacher (in Lesson C) chose modelling as her primary teaching strategy. Constant directive teaching was also seen, particularly by T2 in Lesson B. According to Zhukov (2012), while modelling, directives and praise are frequently used for teaching instrumental music in higher education, this research discovered a predominance of directives and demonstration as teaching strategies, resulting in an underdeveloped level of praise.

Although the students were learning through the processes of imitation and obeying directives, this approach also perhaps deprives them of the ability to play according to their own preferences. Laukka (2004) interviewed teachers from UK and Swedish conservatoires and found that they emphasised verbal inspiration while developing students' independence. Teachers in Laukka's study felt that if the students' primary learning strategy was imitation, they might fail to learn independently, resulting in a lack of their own ideas and an inability to really express the music.

When comparing the most significant aspects of creative teaching revealed by Cremin and Chappell's (2021) comprehensive study of the relevant literature (idea generation and exploration, co-construction and collaboration, supporting autonomy and agency, and

problem solving) with these piano lessons, very few – if any – of these features are evident in the three videoed lessons. However, T1's use of imagery in Lesson A, in addition to relating more to musical expression than technique, also seemed to have a positive influence on S1's performance; more *rubato* was displayed, and both tone quality and musical expression were enhanced. Furthermore, T3 developed several types of exercises to play the same piece in different rhythms. This not only made the exercises more enjoyable, but also engaged S3's attention, enabling him to generate a more creative performance. Given that the performance was first created by the teachers and then conveyed to their students in each of these three lessons, this might imply a reproductive creativity rather than the development of students' individual creativity.

Additionally, the students learned repertoire that included at least one, if not two, pieces of Western classical music. As indicated by Wang (2018), Western piano music has dominated piano education in higher education in China, in part a reflection of the fact that many piano teachers have grown up following the Western pedagogical system. Lesson B did include a contemporary Chinese piece, though it is a somewhat dated work ('*Colourful clouds chasing the moon*' [*Caiyun zhui yue*, 彩云追月] was first composed in 1935 for orchestra and later arranged for piano in 1975 by Jianzhong Wang). However, all of the material in these lessons was taught with the same approach, the primary focus being on accuracy and a realisation of the teacher's interpretation.

Overall, the three lessons were found to favour detailed and informative teaching, the focus being mainly on technique-related content; issues related to emotion and expression were mentioned infrequently. This might be due to the students' levels of learning in relation to each piece, as well as their year of study. This particularly applies to Student B; this filmed lesson may have involved more extensive and informative teaching related to technique than other lessons participated in during the academic year. The students in Lessons A and C were in Year 3 at the time of filming. While Lesson A appeared to contain slightly more discussion and reflection about musical expression compared with the other two piano lessons, it seems as though the student was still not given much freedom to develop their own independence and creativity.

Conclusions

The teaching style and teaching strategies employed in these one-to-one lessons were largely consistent across all three types of institutions. Teachers seemed to have complete control within the one-to-one teaching and learning context, a hierarchical relationship that did not obviously appear to help students to become independent learners. Furthermore, technique-oriented teaching, demonstration and directives as the predominant teaching strategies limited encouragement, and the choice of repertoire all served to limit students' motivation, and thus support them to take responsibility for their own learning, as well as failing to foster the development of creative approaches to instrumental learning. Future

research might examine more teaching contexts, including Year 4 students and lessons for Master's degree students, while simultaneously exploring these phenomena over a longer period of teaching and learning. Findings from this study could also be used to advocate for wider strategies and the facilitation of increased student communication in one-to-one piano lessons, along with considering the implications for how creativity can be further fostered within the context of piano teaching.

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