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ImproStory: Social Improvisation and Storytelling in Arts and Skills Subjects in Teacher Education

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Abstract

Our pedagogic developing project, *ImproStory*, addresses improvisation and storytelling. We study how these two concepts could be applied in arts and crafts education for both primary and Kindergarten (daycare) teachers. The majority of our data consists of digital questionnaires in basic arts and crafts studies of primary pre-service teachers (N=323). Additional data (portfolios) contain a group of Kindergarten and primary pre-service teachers with a focus in visual arts (N=8). All data were collected at the University of Helsinki (Finland) during the academic year 2014–2015. According to our study, pre-service teachers consider improvisation and storytelling to be beneficial skills. They see developing them as necessary and useful. Experimenting and learning the approach appear to strengthen pre-service teachers' collaboration and allow them to build independence, trust, and self-confidence within arts and crafts education. In addition, improvisation and storytelling helps them to recognize their individual creative potential.

Introduction

We work as educators of pre-service teachers at the University of Helsinki (Faculty of Educational Sciences) where we teach various courses in arts and crafts education. During the fall semester of 2014 and spring of 2015, we studied pedagogic approaches to teaching art education in which the foundation was in improvisation and storytelling. We conducted our project within the basic studies of music, arts and crafts education, and optional studies in visual arts. We offered courses on these subjects separately but at the same time. We had pre-service teachers from primary and Kindergarten teacher education. In Finland, primary teachers teach children from seven up to 12 years and Kindergarten teachers from one year up to seven years. In this educational context, we employed and observed our improvisation and storytelling applications and discussed the related pedagogy with pre-service teachers.

Arts and crafts education celebrates individual creative skills and their significance. However, there are many challenges to cultivating creativity. Improvisation or a good story can provide a fresh start - ignite the sleeping innovation. Within our project, both improvisation and storytelling engaged the pre-service teachers in lively pedagogic contemplations and discussions. We searched for multimodal ways to apply improvisation as seamlessly and successfully as it is typically employed in jazz and its pedagogy. In order to reach an application that was adaptable in arts subjects other than music, we decided to focus on storytelling as well. We welded these two approaches together—and so the *ImproStory* began to unfold.

One of our primary aims was to study and apply these two approaches within teacher education and finally be able to share some practical ideas for future teachers in their work in primary school and Kindergarten. In this article, our particular interest is on how pre-service teachers perceive improvisation and storytelling as a pedagogic approach and what kinds of learning outcomes emerge in relation to learning in a group. This report is part of a broader study on improvisation and storytelling in arts and skills subjects (see Kairavuori, Karppinen, Poutiainen, & Rusanen, 2016). In the following sections we discuss improvisation and storytelling and how these two approaches can be implemented in different subjects. We report the analysis of each art subject separately and conclude with a more general discussion of the results of the study.

Guiding Concept: Improvisation

During the last three decades, improvisation has been explored in different ways especially within theatre, education, and music. One of the first systematic developers of improvisation techniques was Johnstone (1979), who introduced it via status utterance to an actors' schooling program in Canada during the late 1960s. In music and music education, improvisation has been an important part of practice in the second part of the 20th century. In jazz, improvisation and its aesthetics are a central part of artistic contemplation and discussion. When describing and explaining the fundamentals of thinking in jazz, Berliner (1994, Chapter 8) relates solo improvisation in jazz to composition that takes place in the moment. Improvisation is musical presence that is unique and solitary. Similarly storytelling and musical narrative are frequently discussed aspects and concepts in jazz. According to Monson (1996, Chapter 3), the momentary and unprepared nature of a jazz ensemble's performance makes its expression outstandingly interactive. Monson (1996) submits that this kind of communication is quite similar, for example, to the way we learn and employ a language. Bjerstedt (2014, Chapter 5 and 6) takes these two views further and examines storytelling as a metaphor. He claims that the presence of a story—if only as an image or metaphor—leads to more profound artistic expression.

In addition to artistic value, improvisation and storytelling have pedagogic potential. When one learns to improvise, the focus is not on what could happen but rather on how to accept and react to all occurring impulses and actions (Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005). Improvisers teach themselves to stay trustful and confident in front of the unexpected, without the support of a prepared and internalized scheme or plan. Consequently, improvisation—as a pedagogic approach—can guide learners to leap into the void, trust others, and direct an interactive discussion toward a shared goal.

Guiding Concept: Storytelling

In this study, we apply the concept storytelling somewhat practically. We understand that storytelling implies sharing stories and narratives. We also understand it as a social activity that typically includes, for example, some improvisation and dramatic embellishments. Storytelling frequently relies on stories that have a plot and characters. It also may employ a narrative viewpoint, continuum, and goal. Yet not all of the above aspects must occur in storytelling; often only a selection of these is present or employed. (For more about the general aspects of storytelling within jazz and theatre arts, for example, see Berliner, 1994, p. 202; Johnstone, 1999, Chapter 5).

Storytelling often is an oral activity. However, in this particular study storytelling is more likely to manifest within or through artistic actions and performance. Thus we define storytelling as sharing a story in several different ways and through various media.

In early childhood education, narrative thinking has been considered essential for a child's experience and organization of the world (Stern, 1985). Bruner (1991; 1996) emphasizes the school's responsibility for developing each student's identity and underlines the important role of narratives in it. He points out that each individual has a special kind of narrative knowledge in which character is subjective and constructive in relation to reality. The strength of the narratives can be found on the basis that they organize human experiences in ways that can be socially shared.

In school, little attention has been paid to the use of narratives (Tolska, 2002, p. 176). However, narratives could be employed as a tool for externalizing, conceptualizing, and understanding the process, by which the learner frames new and problematic issues (Tolska, 2002, p. 176).

Social interaction emphasizes the ethical dimensions of narratives. In narrative pedagogy, Goodson and Gill (2011) underline dialogic encounters and find them significant to developing respect, human dignity, and caring relationships in storytelling situations. According to them, creating a trusting and safe space is the key to an open atmosphere where individuals feel comfortable sharing their lived experiences as well as their understanding, knowledge, and values. In the center are the mutual relationships and the interaction between the teacher and the learners (Chapter 7).

Zander (2007) values that narratives in art learning have the ability to touch us emotionally. Stories assist us in remembering and making sense of our own experiences and the lives around us and even in changing our worldview. When meanings are negotiated within a social context and through social interaction, narratives can be understood as expressions of social activity and identity. Historically, the community has always been meaningful in art learning.

Especially in the fine arts, the trades informed their practitioners through apprenticeship. While apprentices learned artistic means by watching, doing, and listening to stories, they acquired important understandings by immersing themselves in the community of the artists of their time (p. 195).

As teacher educators, we are primarily interested in the relationship of improvisation and storytelling, which can be described as feeding each other. They could be parallel or alternative activities and in our study they appear in varied ways. For instance, we considered how we could more widely apply jazz thinking to teaching methods in other artistic areas of study including didactic studies of arts and skills subjects. Know-how that is both thematic and crosses over to other subjects is a theme of pedagogic development in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education in Finland (The National Agency for Education, 2014). The Finnish national guidelines stress that an essential aim in learning is student-centered activity and collaboration. Collaboration and peer learning are also emphasized according to socio-constructivist learning views (see Vygotsky, 1997; Säljö, 2004). Because thematic know-how can be used in multiple disciplines, we decided to apply and study this through improvisation and storytelling in our *ImproStory* project.

As educators, we had for long desired to design and organize a fresh, extensive pedagogic approach for our pre-service teachers that would assuredly cross over subject borders (of music, arts, and crafts education). We expected that this was possible through improvisation and storytelling. We also proposed that through this approach it was possible to manage and respond to some challenges of learning in a group. Our proposition was essentially supported by our own previous observations and broad experiences. Within *ImproStory* we wished to summarize some of the pedagogic concepts and practices that we had already completed and employed and also to potentially enhance them together with our pre-service teachers. This latter action would deepen our understanding of our pedagogic tools and practices and help us to advance with them. Furthermore, we craved introducing and testing new ways of cooperating between us (the teacher educators). This would become beneficial when our integrative pedagogic approach were put into practice on a larger scale.

Research Method, Questions, and Data. This qualitative research attempts to understand pre-service teachers' experiences in social educational situations and creations of the social world (cf. Patton, 2002; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 5). This study includes multi-level cooperation and planning among researchers who employ the views of developmental work research (Engeström, 2001; Gallison, 1997; Gorman & Clayton, 2005). Collaborative developmental work research includes cross-border interaction and trading zones (Gallison, 1997), which involve a common space, shared objectives, joint language, and mutual exchange of thoughts and practices beneficial to all participants (Engeström, 2001 Gallison,

1997; Gorman & Clayton, 2005). Through several discussions, educators with different disciplines, backgrounds, and expertise create common understanding about research design and questions by acknowledging ethical dilemmas, formulating a questionnaire, and construing final outcomes of the study - bearing in mind reflexivity of the study process (e.g. Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 311). Each educator described and analyzed his/her own subject data, which was a basis for reflective discussions. In addition to reflective discussion and the main data (questionnaire), all researchers made observations during their teaching-learning situations and took notes (triangulation).

In our project we were particularly interested in how pre-service teachers can benefit from ImproStory and learning in a group. We collected a digital questionnaire (2014 and 2015) about pre-service teachers' experiences on improvisation and storytelling. Each questionnaire was modified to cover specifications of each subject. Through open-ended questions, pre-service teachers observed their experiences on the following themes: 1) individual learning; 2) learning in a group; and 3) enhancing skills in relation to their future work as a primary or Kindergarten teacher. In this study, our focus was on social interaction and its significance in learning in a group. The research questions were, "How do pre-service teachers perceive improvisation and storytelling as a pedagogic approach?" and "What kind of learning outcomes emerged in relation to learning in a group?"

The main data is composed of three similar types of data from first-year primary pre-service teachers majoring in basic studies in pedagogy of music, visual art, and textile craft and one applied data from pre-service teachers minoring in subject studies in visual art (see Table 1).

Table 1.

The number of study groups and students in them, durations of group action examined, and number of attending pre-service teachers versus students participating in the questionnaire.

	Total number of groups	Number of pre-service teachers per group	Duration of group action examined	Participants in the questionnaire /total participants in a course
Music (D1)	7	18–24	3 x 2 h (90 min)	132 / 142
Crafts (D2)	4	16	1 x 4 h (180 min)	64 / 64
Visual	7	18–22	1 x 4 h (180 min)	119 / 142

Arts 1 (D3)				
Visual Arts 2 (D4)	1	15	3 x 4 h (180 min)	8 / 15

A total of 323 students participated in the questionnaire from different arts and skills subjects in the academic year 2014–2015. In the following subsections, we report the results of each art subject separately and mark them as the following: music (D1), crafts (D2), and visual art (D3: major subject studies, and D4: minor subject studies). We use abbreviations (e.g., D1:S9 = Data 1 [music] pre-service teacher 9).

Music data was collected during three 1.5-hour-long hands-on group work sessions. There were seven groups, and from 18 to 24 attendees per group. Altogether, 132 pre-service teachers attended to the music questionnaire. In crafts, the data was collected during one 4-hour-long session from four groups with 16 pre-service teachers per group, and a total of 64 pre-service teachers answered the questionnaire. In visual arts, the data consist of 119 total pre-service teachers' replies, which were gathered from the first 4-hour sessions of seven groups, each having from 18 to 22 attendees. In addition, the questionnaire was gathered from a minor subject studies course of visual arts (5 ECTS by European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) where seven exchange pre-service teachers and eight primary school pre-service teachers (2nd to 5th grades) attended. However, only Finnish pre-service teachers were requested to respond to the questionnaire. The data was collected from three hands-on sessions, which lasted four hours each.

We analyzed the data by using qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The process followed the general principles of an empirical-based content analysis (Patton, 2002; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009) and was inductive by nature. This means that the researchers' reasoning processes were directly based on the empirical data in the questionnaires (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009).

The basic meaning of the content analysis is to examine data systematically and formulate the data into a clear and condensed form. According to the basis of the content analysis, we reduced the data in relation to how it reflected learning in a group. First, all expressions describing learning in a group were revealed. Second, the similar expressions were clustered and separated from unlike expressions. Third, the data was classified according to how students described positive and critical experiences during their group work, how they learned together, and how they improvised and applied storytelling together. Later, the essential

information was revealed until saturation was reached. The data and its analysis revealed how pre-service teachers formulate effects of storytelling as well as how improvisation and storytelling could be employed in education. In the following chapters we each describe pre-service teachers' experiences in three different art subjects and finally sum them up for concluding remarks.

Results: Music. Every ImproStory music education session focused on a different (musical) school instrument or instrument group. Pre-service teachers studied, practiced, and progressed by playing the instrument or instruments. Student musical improvisation was observed in two different levels of expertise. Improvisation was used during session warm-ups and tuning by students who had only a very limited control of the instrument or instruments. Alternatively, when the pre-service teacher group advanced in performing with the instrument or instruments improvisation was implemented gradually and from one exercise to another.

Five-string kantele—a traditional Finnish plucked string instrument of the dulcimer or zither family—was the focus of the first session (for a brief introduction on kantele, see Broughton, Ellingham, & Trillo, 1999, p. 93). In the beginning, pre-service teachers familiarized themselves with a melodic variation in small groups of 3–5 pre-service teachers. The melodic variation was applied on a popular Finnish children's song, *Satu meni saunaan* (*Satu Went to a Sauna*). The majority of the pre-service teachers knew this simple song, which occupies only the first five tones of a major scale. The variation exercise emphasized the rhythmic character of the melody. Later, every small group had to design and quickly prepare (in only five minutes) an original, fresh, and personal arrangement and interpretation of the same song and perform it to others. Within this head arrangement (i.e. not notated but only learned by heart) type exercise, pre-service teachers were encouraged to rely on improvisation. They were also asked to imply stories, images, or moods in their kantele variations and arrangements.

The second session concentrated on the soprano recorder (i.e., the popular plastic version of this woodwind instrument). This time pre-service teachers were immersed in improvisation as soon as the recorders were picked up. As a warm-up exercise, they learned, by ear, to perform a three-voice accompaniment to hard rock band Led Zeppelin's classic *Stairway to Heaven* (1971). This accompaniment was played on top of Led Zeppelin's original recording. The arrangement was constructed by the educator (i.e. the pre-service teacher instructor) and applied to the verse that follows the guitar solo. As soon as this verse was over, pre-service teachers were asked to depart from the arrangement and submit (simultaneously) a short free (i.e. not restricted) recorder solo without specific instructions or advice. The following improvisation exercise applied the educator's original composition entitled *Vinku vapaudelle* (*A Squeak for Freedom*). In this tune, a section of the pre-service teacher group conducted an

accompaniment (see Figure 1, the lower staff) with recorders and low, wooden one-bar bass mallet instruments (which are often associated to Orff pedagogy). The rest of the group improvised further on recorders, according to a pre-selected and familiarized selection of tones. The tone selection consisted of a (natural) minor scale, and solos were played in small groups of 3–5 pre-service teachers (soloing simultaneously). As soon as the pre-service teachers became more accustomed with the scale and soloing, they were asked to imply a story or mood in their improvisations. The various interpretations were then discussed together during the short breaks between the performances.

Vinku vapaudelle

Ari Poutiainen

The musical score for "Vinku vapaudelle" is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled "Aloitus & lopetus", shows a melody in the upper staff and a bass line in the lower staff. The melody starts with a G4 quarter note, followed by a quarter rest, then G4, A4, B4, and C5. The bass line starts with a G2 quarter note, followed by a quarter rest, then G2, A2, B2, and C3. The first system ends with a double bar line. The second system, labeled "Mollitausta", shows a melody in the upper staff and a bass line in the lower staff. The melody consists of a series of chords: H=B, A, H=B, A, A, G, H=B, A. The bass line consists of a series of chords: Am, Am, Em, Am. The second system ends with a double bar line.

Figure 1. A sample of the *Vinku vapaudelle* lead sheet. The upper staff presents the introduction/ending of the tune, and the lower staff presents the notated and textual instructions for the improvisation accompaniment.

Various mallet instruments were applied in the third sessions. In this session, pre-service teachers formed a large mallet ensemble consisting of both small and middle-sized xylophones and glockenspiels as well as large, wooden one-bar bass mallet instruments. Solomon Linda's (1908–1962, a South African musician, singer and composer) worldwide popular song *The Lion Sleeps Tonight* was employed as the starting point and background of the mallet solo improvisations. The tune was performed in the easy key of C major, and the C

major pentatonic scale consequently appeared as the tone selection, where the improvisations could be drawn from. This time the improvised solos were conducted in pairs or small groups of 3–4 pre-service teachers (while the rest of the group simultaneously accompanied). Now, the element of storytelling was present right from the first improvisation exercises. In addition, aspects reflecting musical drama, dramaturgy, or other interpretative devices were introduced, studied, and put quickly into practice. At the final part of the session, pre-service teachers were encouraged to take an individual solo turn (i.e., to perform a solo alone over the accompaniment), and some individuals delightfully took part in this slightly exciting opportunity.

According to the questionnaire, pre-service teachers were widely entertained by the improvisation exercises and enjoyed conducting them. Only a few individuals saw these exercises as useless, too difficult, or frightening. The replies to the open-ended questions reveal that although the pre-service teachers were amused by the exercises, they still focused on improvisation and storytelling ambitiously. Some of them were inspired to write longer textual contemplations on these matters.

Several pre-service teachers noted that when the storytelling (element) was added to the variation and improvisation exercises, it had an immediate effect on their own and others' attitudes towards performing and, thus, the musical outcome as well. Storytelling guided pre-service teachers "to think about the playing" more (D1: S6). Storytelling made performing "more meaningful" while also "forcing" [them] to try harder" (D1: S15). Telling stories through a musical performance led pre-service teachers to "investigate the significance of different tones and their influence on emotions and thoughts" (D1: S39). It also "increased the individual level of concentration while playing" (D1: S44). All in all, storytelling made the exercises interesting and important (D1: S51).

Some respondents applied music theoretical terminology when they analyzed what resulted from the inclusion of storytelling. One pre-service teacher noted that the element of storytelling made the outcome more melodic (D1: S43). Another observed that "[When the storytelling element was added to the exercises], the players took advantage of rests and breaks. There was no need to play all the tones [of the tone selection], and the solos became more structured..." (D1: S64). One pre-service teacher paid attention to the pedagogical aspects in the exercises and concluded that the storytelling "[d]eferred the musical pressure because then it wasn't necessary anymore to develop a melody but tell a story instead" (D1: S90). Another summarized that "[n]ow, while one played, one also had to listen to the other playing, make interpretations (in regard to, for example, the speed and selection of tones) on it, and react to it. The results were interesting. Funny sounds and stories [were created] without any deeper knowledge or experience!" (D1: S29).

Storytelling obviously had an immediate impact on the small pre-service teacher peer groups' or pairs' work. General remarks on this were already made verbally when the educator guided pre-service teachers to analyze the musical interpretations during the short breaks between the performances. One pre-service teacher stated that when one was telling a story, "one had to listen to the other person and try to make the music somehow sensible" (D1: S48). At best, a pre-service teacher could arrive in somewhat deep and self-reflective contemplation: "Some pairs truly produced real stories, like fights between a couple. I then started to wonder if it really is possible to express things so clearly through wordless music, meaning that I did reach a new viewpoint on storytelling" (D1: S25).

Some felt that storytelling was a challenge. Difficulties occurred, for example, when pre-service teachers saw themselves being too slow to invent a story (D1: S22). Such views were, however, shared by a small minority.

We can, however, conclude that ImproStory within music sessions was a success; the storytelling immediately added at least something small to the playing and interpretations. Although storytelling was applied only as a loose metaphor (i.e., without any deeper discussion on the definition and meaning of the concept), it did often modify the musical expression. In this respect, it can be said that the storytelling increased pre-service teachers' concentration and presence. In related to Bjersted's thinking (2014, p. 233), the improvisers were in touch with their inner flow and the essential momentary aspect of creative musical conduct.

The collected data clearly indicate that the improvisation exercises in music had a strong influence on pre-service teachers' collaboration and its dynamics. In one response, this was ingeniously summarized: "The improvisation exercises increased the student [teacher] groups' collaboration and emphasized the significance of teamwork and practicing. Within improvisation, everybody could reach a feeling of being an important part of the group, regardless of their playing skills. Improvisation united the group by granting everybody a chance and obligation to do and act" (D1: S12). Similar messages appeared repeatedly in the data. These exercises created shared goals (D1: S39), lowered the threshold for performing (D1: S50), and diminished or removed the differences in musical skills (D1: S56). Some depth and nuances were gained within the various musical encounters: "Through these exercises, my relation to all student [teacher] colleagues got warmer. We honestly had fun playing the exercises together" (D1: S68).

While musical performing in an ensemble already is a social activity per se, it seems that improvisation and storytelling underlined the interaction even more. The above reveals that a

safe space and supportive atmosphere was achieved. This again enabled learning that was potentially more inspiring and touching (see Goodson & Gill, 2011; Zander, 2007).

Notably, several pre-service teachers paid attention to the increased level of listening. During the exercises, “one could focus on listening to the others instead of their own playing” (D1: S29). Predictably, the responses also underlined the liberating effect of improvisation. In addition, “somehow communality was more in focus because we were requested to encourage and listen to others’ performances” (D1: S36). “During the improvisation exercises, we gained a chance to perform to others while we hadn’t yet given any performances. There hardly was any threshold to improvise,” summarized one happy music pre-service teacher (D1: S114).

As expected, the improvisation increased pre-service teachers’ musical interaction. The momentary aspect of this particular kind of musical conduct enhanced musical communication (see Monson, 1996). Pre-service teachers acknowledged how improvisation liberated their expression, positively modified the classroom atmosphere, and led them to accept and face different impulses and actions (see Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005). Our preliminary data suggests the possibility that the learning process (cf. Zander 2007) became more interactive than it might have been if musical improvisation had not been employed at all. This, however, can only be assumed; these data are naturally not sufficient for any further conclusions in this regard. ImproStory considerably enhanced the music sessions, urged forward the musical expression, and improved the instruction. Without it, many minor but meaningful stories would have remained untold.

Results: Crafts. The ImproStory was employed in two ways during the didactic course of Crafts. First, ImproStory was used as an approach to discover themes during small group work (three students in a group) and hands-on sessions of textile crafts. Then, it was used to improvise a common story in small groups and create an artifact according to the story.

In the beginning of the course, pre-service teachers formed small groups and all of them individually answered seven timed questions on a piece of paper using one or two word answers. The questions included: “How do you relax?,” “Who is your idol?,” and “What is a color of your dream?” Thereafter, answers were divided into three piles according to what they described: 1) human being, animal, or thing; 2) milieu; or 3) feeling or atmosphere. Then, from each of the three piles, one paper was extracted for the next step, discussion. Immediately lively and cheerful discussions started and the pre-service teachers expressed their individual thoughts and associations about the three allotted words. After the free discussion period, they improvised a common story around these three words. Finally using some yarn techniques (e.g., crochet, knitting), they designed artifacts based on the created

story. They were required to produce either one product that all students touched and worked on or several products that all strongly support the story.

Pre-service teachers' comments, such as "Discovering a story is a good basis for group work, and it helps to listen to others' thoughts" (D2: S20) note the advantages of working together. This kind of shared learning and collaboration is in line with current interactive teaching and learning methods and supports creativity (Zander 2007). Many pre-service teachers said that the improvised story sparked inspiration and gave meaning to the task, opened minds for creativity (D2: S10), increased motivation toward the work (D2: S44) and supported awakening of imagination, free associations, and perceptions (D2: S11). However, a pre-service teacher said that starting with storytelling felt disconnected, and she would have liked to have more time for deeper consideration and design (D2: S61). Actually, in that case, potential for improvisation and rapid storytelling would have been lost. As was already seen in music exercises, improvisation included catching the moment and reacting to the unexpected (see Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005). According to Balachandra et al. (2005), the focus is particularly on how to accept and react to all occurring impulses and actions.

Many pre-service teachers discovered that group work revealed strengths of participants; i.e. the feeling that they were on the same level with their skills and that they could work together for a common goal. It was easier to discover a theme when there was a common story behind it" (D2: S28), and, "the design and the implemented artifact was really a shared one because all students could express their ideas and thoughts in it and attend for implementation with their own strengths" (D2: S37). It was great to see how pre-service teachers support each other, similar to how Goodson and Gill (2011) wrote about caring relationships in storytelling situations. There were no complaints about different craft skills even though some of the pre-service teachers hesitated about their skills (D2: S14), particularly when techniques were difficult (D2: S8). As one pre-service teacher highlighted, "the focus was not on a technically perfect outcome but rather on learning to create together and living a story together" (D2: S23). It was like learning a language (cf. Monson 1996), the crafts language.

Monson (1996) discussed the momentary and unprepared nature of a jazz ensemble's performance and how it makes its expression interactive. Correspondingly, storytelling in crafts broadened the implementation and the outcome of the task. As part of group work, one's single thought might inspire another's idea, which would not have happened while working alone. It was obvious that no one in a group could dominate the process because the response in designing and implementing was a shared one (D2: S46) and produced by using a commonly agreed language of crafts. The process became a story, knitted together. A pre-service teacher aptly described how storytelling eased her encounter with craft materials and

processes: “It was easier to make ‘contact’ with the yarn when the soul-searching was framed by shared storytelling” (D2: S11).



Figure 2, 3 and 4. Pre-service teachers’ artifacts in textile crafts from the ImproStory project. (Photos: Seija Karppinen)

Storytelling and improvisation were experienced as a meaningful and inspiring way to approach craft and design. The story made the process easier and the outcome became more multifaceted. Storytelling and improvisation remedied issues of idea generation and motivation often pervasive in the making of crafts. This showed that making crafts could be approached by working together toward a common goal (D2: S32) through negotiating, reasoning, and ideation. Pre-service teachers also expressed how, in the best case, this kind of activity could develop individual thinking and social skills (D2: S42), improve the cohesion of the group (D2: S56), and help individuals feel aligned with a certain group. Furthermore, listening to others’ thoughts and ideas may develop one’s ability to share educational space with and listen to others (D2: S19).

Most of the pre-service teachers were impressed by the ImproStory and its application in crafts. Many thought it could be successfully replicated in future instruction. What was also positive to notice was how storytelling was affecting the pre-service teachers’ writing and expressiveness in their learning diaries and the e-questionnaire. They used more artistic expressions, idioms, and poetry in expressing themselves. This is similar to how Bjerstedt (2014, Chapter 5 and 6) talks about storytelling as a “metaphor” and how presence in a common story leads to more profound artistic expression. In crafts artistic expression appeared not only during the process or in the end product, but it continued its existence in the other activities.

Results: Visual arts I. Improvisation and storytelling were used in the course Didactics of Visual Arts for primary teachers. Here the exercises in improvisation and storytelling were linked to three sessions of drawing comics. Improvisation and storytelling were applied both separately and together in these exercises. At first, the purpose of the improvisation exercises was to support a playful, creative, and experiential atmosphere for artistic creation in a group. The process began by exploring how to use various drawing tools. By varying the way the pre-service teachers approached drawing, they were encouraged to use the tools in personal ways. For example, they listened to music or examined various objects by touch and then they drew their perceptions on one large shared paper. Some of the drawing tools were imagined to be characters, and through drawing the pre-service teachers improvised playful stories of meetings between the anthropomorphized tools. In this process, the traditional way of thinking of the paper as one's own space and of knowing "the right way" of using a certain drawing tool were broken down. The key ideas were to solve creative problems, improvise, and tell stories by drawing. This approach was also applied in the later phase of the process to support the invention of characters in comics and writing the manuscript. For example, pre-service teachers used randomly chosen pictures from the media to invent their principal characters. In addition, they improvised stories in a small group for manuscripts by combining three randomly chosen pictures.



Figure 5, 6, and 7. Pre-service teachers' improvisations by drawing tools. (Photos: Seija Kairavuori)

The pre-service teachers experienced the exercises positively, saying that they "were good and active, joyful exercises, which heightened interaction" (D3: S24). The exercises led the pre-service teachers to reflect on this school subject by "raising thoughts of what teaching visual arts can be" (D3: S23). According to the pre-service teachers, these kinds of exercises "can break down old fears of visual arts as a technical, performance-centered school subject" (D3: S119), and they can "undo the pressures that adults experience about art as figurative and ideal models" (D3: S26). The exercises "showed that sometimes the process is more important than the final product" (D3: S21), they abandoned right-or-wrong-thinking (D3: S50), and "created an atmosphere where visual arts means making creative things together" (D3: S85).

Instead of strictly defined end products that the pre-service teachers might have experienced earlier in art education, they were given another, optional perspective to arts (D3: S94).

Improvisation supported an atmosphere fruitful for collaboration in many ways. For example, the pre-service teachers reported that the atmosphere was relaxed and therefore they felt they could express things in a personal way, freed from comparison and shyness (D3: S5, S1). One of the reasons for this seemed to be that “there were no right or wrong answers but rather personal stories and works of art” (D3: S8). This put them in an equal position as learners, without fear of failure (D3: S10, S15) and made it possible for everyone to express him or herself (D3: S8). One student acknowledged how the exercises were accessible to all students, claiming, “they were suitable for all of us despite the level of expertise or the quality of personal learning history [...] there was no stress of being novice or expert” (D3: S13). In line with the experiences in music and crafts and the notions of Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, (2005), these reported experiences suggest that when one learns to improvise, the focus is not on what could happen or go wrong but on how to be trustful in front of the unexpected and instead accept and react to all occurring impulses and actions.

Intensive interaction was a key component in both the student’s teachers art making and in their discussions. As one pre-service teacher described, “we all were encouraged to express our views, and we listened to each other” (D3: S17). The open discussion in small groups was experienced as fruitful (D3: S16), and the pre-service teachers felt they “had to collaborate” (D3: S27). These exercises required reciprocity in the group interaction, which was stated, for example, by noting that “you needed courage and to trust in other students” (D3: S29) and “you had to show your own work to others, which made me feel encouraged” (D3: S99). The choice of using one large shared paper turned out to be fruitful as well. For example, one of the students said it was “as if we did one common work of art; there were no boundaries between each person’s contribution” (D3: S33). It was stated that “inventing the shared story and making art on a shared piece of paper heightened a feeling of connection” (D3: S37), and “the shared paper created the feeling that we all were of equal value” (D3: S96). Thus, with this pedagogic approach, pre-service teachers seemed to have created a trusting and safe space in an open atmosphere where individuals felt comfortable sharing their lived experiences as well as their understanding, knowledge, and values (Goodson & Gill, 2011).

In line with this, learning as a group was reported as “[lending a] deeper understanding of and [developing more profound] thinking [surrounding] this issue” (D3: S43) because “others’ views broadened my own imagination” (D3: S64). It was also valuable to recognize that the pre-service teachers believed that everyone was successful (D3: S79) and that the exercises built confidence and supported a positive outlook (D3: S90). Furthermore, the pre-service

teachers learned that “enthusiasm seemed to spread from one person to another” (D3: S73) and that “creation may start from a tiny little idea and there is no need to have a clear figure in the mind” (D3: S77).

Despite the majority’s positive experience, not everyone could utilize the freedom that improvisation and storytelling brought. Some of the pre-service teachers reported that not all in the group were able to focus on the issue in a responsible way. Some of them “giggled and interfered with other's concentration” and even “constructed meanings that were insulting and discriminatory for some groups of people” (D3: S7) and this hampered the whole group.

Results: Visual arts 2. The optional studies on visual arts course focused on color and painting. Improvisation was used in the first session and storytelling in two later sessions. Painting started as improvisatory experimentation and fast sketching without any predetermined theme with opaque aquarelle pigments. The first sketches made were compositions with thick, earthy pigments. During the working process, pre-service teachers were asked to concentrate on the qualities of the colors and their hues and combinations.

Pre-service teachers considered the improvisation exercises useful “for releasing creativity” (D4: S1). Improvisation allowed them to paint freely and this was seen as a good experience. Sketching made starting the process easy and working without a predetermined theme led them to concentrate on the painting process. “In the painting process, I was not concentrating on what the painting should be. I was open to issues that came out in the process” (D4: S6). Improvisation was also seen as a useful pedagogic instrument. However, the pre-service teachers emphasized that improvisation must not be solely free experimentation; “It should be taught with awareness of the goals” (D4: S3). They believe that children who are oriented toward perfection should be given special pedagogical consideration in order to encourage them to release control.

In storytelling exercises the task was to describe childhood, youth, and adulthood experiences using different color scales in each painting. After the second session the pre-service teachers reflected on their experiences in pairs and during the last study session, the whole group discussed the background stories of these paintings. The pre-service teachers emphasized that cooperative methods, discussion, and sharing made learning more interesting and motivating. Working in groups and pairs facilitated social relationships and pre-service teachers felt that their self-confidence was strengthened. Pre-service teachers reported that it was easier to paint when using the medium to tell autobiographical stories and they valued working from this natural starting point. One pre-service teacher reported, “My self-criticism diminished when the goal was to tell about my own life and not to show how good painter I am. That released

[my] creativity and express[iveness]” (D4: S3). That the presence of a story feeds artistic expression (see Bjerstedt, 2014) parallels similar music and craft education findings.

Pre-service teachers considered it important to be able choose their level of intimacy when sharing. They did not want to share deeply intimate issues. “I chose issues that I dared to share with strangers” (D4: S1). The paintings can be seen as visual narratives that allowed the pre-service teachers to control their expressive space and its openness. Personal experience was expressed through painting and storytelling became a part of the social process, where experiences were shared with others in the group. This sharing helped to form a social space, which helped the students construct their professional identity. One of the pre-service teachers said, “It is important for developing our personality and identity that we know ourselves and have good self-esteem. When somebody is listening to your story or is interested what you are doing, you get a message that you are liked and honored” (D4: S3). Later, in their diaries, pre-service teachers reflected their experiences and thought that having more awareness of their own childhood experiences could be a good professional basis for understanding childhood as a stage of life and the lived experiences of children. Goodson and Gill (2011) state that a narrative approach offers us ethical means for encountering each other as human beings on many levels. The students emphasized the significance of respecting human dignity.

The pre-service teachers thought that the entire process widened their understanding in multiple ways. They developed new ideas and perspectives about painting materials and methods as well as on color theory. It made them think about the expressive power of different painting media as well as the significance of the color in artistic expression. The study group formed a learning community where they felt safe and were encouraged to explore through practical stories in a professional way, similar to a traditional fine art apprenticeship community described by Zander (2007). Working through autobiographical storytelling also expanded the pre-service teachers’ understanding of self.



Figure 8, 9, and 10. Visual narratives of three students: significant moments from childhood to adulthood. (Photos: Sinikka Rusanen)

Discussion. The goal of our study was to explore pre-service teachers' experiences of pedagogical approaches to improvisation and storytelling as they applied to music, crafts, and visual arts education. We comprehensively experimented and investigated this in our *ImproStory* project. One major contribution of our research is that it describes how improvisation and storytelling allowed our students to experience and value the process of learning. Through process-centered pedagogy, feelings of belonging to the learning community were strengthened and a willingness to learn from each other increased. Pre-service teachers considered our various improvisation and storytelling exercises to be personally valuable and rewarding. According to our analysis, the exercises emphasized creative processes and encouraged students to rely on the ideas and initiatives that at first felt insignificant. Pre-service teachers also appreciated that social improvisation and storytelling made learning exciting and enjoyable.

The results indicate that the exercises implemented in our project concerning arts and crafts education changed pre-service teachers' (pre)conceptions of improvisation and storytelling as a pedagogical approach. Among our pre-service teachers, improvisation was initially labeled as a vague or "freak-out" action, but by the end of the study, the pre-service teachers considered it a pedagogic approach with several, valuable dimensions. Improvisation helped free their minds from negatively focusing on skills and abilities. In spite of level of expertise (or inexpertise) the pre-service teachers experienced a deep understanding of the core school subjects. Many of the pre-service teachers considered the exercises highly adaptable.

Through the exercises, the pre-service teachers gained new perspectives to produce and interpret arts and crafts education. Instead of targeting a foreseen and regulated result, they learned to face the uncertain and unforeseen phases of creative processes (Monson, 1996; Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005). In line with the latest Core Curriculum for the Basic Education in Finland (National Agency for Education, 2014), this expertise is essential when the learner, with his or her own interests and in collaboration with others, is exploring wider learning areas and crossing borders between subjects. Regarding our first research question pre-service teachers perceive improvisation and storytelling as a significant and innovative pedagogical approaches. For example, in the studies of crafts and visual arts, the pre-service teachers were positively surprised that it was possible to create artworks together in small groups, not only individually. This observation led them reflect on the aspects of group learning more carefully.

In response to our second research question which asked, "What kind of learning outcomes emerged in relation to learning in a group?", we found that through improvisation an atmosphere was created, which supported interaction, encouraged reciprocity, and diminished fears. Further, improvisation exercises showed the individual pre-service teachers' insights

into the positive impact of learning in peer groups. Pre-service teachers valued that they were asked to listen and heed respect to each other and to each student's performance. As a result their willingness to learn from each other grew. They appreciated the dialogue between individual and group learning. Improvisation exercises formed a space for discussions and negotiations where the participants could mutually tell their stories through expressive means such as words, movements, gestures, notes, images, and other media (cf. Monson, 1996; Balachandra, Bordone, Menkel-Meadow, Ringstrom, & Sarath, 2005). The continuum of activities was influenced by the ways the participants were encouraged to answer various impulses of others, as a social call, through improvisation and storytelling.

Storytelling offered a guiding structure for the collaboration and heightened interaction in the group. It gave the group a shared mindset, as well as helped individuals create new personal meanings. Through storytelling, the creation of significance was based both on socially and personally constructed meanings. In narratives, collectively shared meanings can be integrated into a personal narrative even when they are not constructed in immediate interaction with others. As Bruner (1991; 1996; 2004) states, narratives construct human reality and human experience in many ways. In its essence, narrative is a culturally bound and socially constructed phenomenon. Therefore narrative approach and the use of storytelling in arts education highlight the role of social construction in learning.

In conclusion, our collaboratively developed pedagogic ImproStory project led the pre-service teachers to interweave current themes in socio-constructivist learning with perspectives of basic school and early childhood education. Through this set of exercises, a learning space that provoked the students to question their earlier experiences and empowered them to act independently and in new ways was constructed. This is significant when we consider contemporary Finnish teacher education and its aim to reflect the renewal of national curriculum and pedagogical thinking hidden in the traditions of different subjects, and also when we focus on pre-service teachers' individual histories of learning. Crucial in our project was the socially shared space, which was constructed by improvisation and storytelling.

The starting point of our ImproStory project was in jazz, and we were delighted how fluently we found means to transform it to all arts subjects. The pre-service teachers appreciated the transferability of the approaches in the educational environments. Their experiences proved that the open character of the exercises especially supported fruitful interaction in learning. This observation motivates us to continue our research in order to analyze and conceptualize our improvising and storytelling approaches in relation to the processual and explorative character of learning in arts and crafts education.

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