Student learning in higher instrumental education: who is responsible?

**Harald Jørgensen**

Mr Harald Jørgensen, Norges Musikkhøgskole, Postboks 5190 Majorstua, N-0302 Oslo, Norway
E-mail: hjorgensen@nmh.no

Who is responsible for the learning outcomes for a student in higher instrumental education? The issue of students having influence and responsibility over their instrumental learning is a complex question. Based on research, this article discusses three questions. First, the relationship between teachers and students in instrumental lessons; second, the role of the students as practitioners: how independent and responsible their practice behaviour is; third, an institution’s role in students’ learning. Both teachers and students work in an educational institution. The institutional responsibility for students’ learning is the most neglected area of students’ learning generally.

**Introduction**

Who is responsible for the learning outcomes for a student in higher instrumental education? Placing the main responsibility for learning on the student is part of an educational philosophy with roots in the enlightenment and earlier. The many educational reform movements at the beginning of the twentieth century, both in Europe and the USA, carried this philosophy further, and research in education and psychology has provided many types of theoretical and empirical support for the philosophy. Even so, it is a very complex field. A fundamental question concerns our reasons for the utilisation of student interest and responsibility: is it because this is a good ‘method’ that facilitates more efficient learning, or is it that we believe it to be the most ‘natural’ approach to learning, reflecting a fundamental characteristic of human nature? And another aspect, related to the first one: is the utilisation of student initiative and responsibility a means to further a narrow aim of learning, or is it (also) to strengthen their independence as learners and as musicians?

Even if I am in favour of students’ initiative and responsibility for their own learning, I am not sure that this is the dominant practice in music education. I am not confident that this is the case in higher, or tertiary, instrumental education, i.e. in conservatories of music, academies of music and Musikhochschulen. In this article, I will discuss three issues connected with this theme. Given that students’ responsibility is closely connected with the relationship between student and teacher, I will start my discussion with this relationship.

Student learning does not take place in lessons only. Instrumental students in higher music education are doing most of their instrumental learning away from their teachers, in practice sessions. When practising, they are (usually) on their own, so the crucial question
is: how independent and responsible is their practice behaviour? This is the second issue. Because both teachers and students work in an educational institution, my third issue will address the institution’s role in student learning.

**The student–teacher relationship**

**Dependent students and dominating teachers?**

Historically, the predominant relationship between teacher and student in instrumental instruction has been described as a master–apprentice relationship, where the master usually is looked at as a role model and a source of identification for the student, and where the dominating mode of student learning is imitation. For me, a key question in this relationship is: is the student given opportunity to develop his independence and active initiative in learning, or is he restricted to develop his ability to receive, absorb and transform teacher influences? I will offer some suggestions relevant to this issue, stemming from research.

In a study carried out in the instrumental department of an English university, Persson observed and interviewed seven instrumental teachers and their students, in and out of lessons. In a report describing a clarinet teacher as a case study, Persson (1994: 226) states that:

Mrs Greenfield is generally a very dominating teacher that demands more or less total compliance to the suggestions and solutions she provides her student with. It appears that students have little opportunity to express their own opinions and ideas . . . There was usually little or no time for students to reflect upon what was said during lessons. From the time of entering the room till the time of concluding the lesson, students are overwhelmed by Mrs Greenfield’s intense charisma and never-ending flow of hints, tips and suggestions, on how to do things better and more correctly.

Many readers will probably recognise this type of teaching, from their own experience or from hearing it described by others. Is there anything wrong with it? Isn’t this a model for good teaching? Instead of answering that question now, I will return to Persson and his description of another teacher. In this case, he describes the teaching behaviour and interaction between a piano teacher and nine students (Persson, 1996). Asking them to estimate the degree to which they felt that they were normally taking an active part in the lessons, they gave their estimation as a percentage. Mrs White, the piano teacher, divided the initiative between herself and the students on a 50:50 ratio. On the other hand, the average percentage allotted to Mrs White from the students was 64 per cent, while the students estimated their own active participation in the lessons to be 36 per cent. Taking this at its face value, not bothering with questions of reliability and validity, I get an impression of a teacher with a dominant share of initiative and activity in lessons. One student has withdrawn (or been pushed?) from claiming any initiative or attempt to influence her own situation, giving Mrs White 100 per cent credit for the activity. None of the students gave themselves more than 50 per cent credit for the initiative.

Judging from this research, these teachers may be described as dominating, exploiting student initiative and responsibility very little. On the other hand, there is evidence of a certain differentiation of approach, where the teachers adapted their approach to indivi-
dual differences among the students. A more dialogue-dominated approach is described by Schön (1987). He describes a master class where teacher and student obviously engage in a verbal and musical dialogue where the student is able to present his own ideas. This type of relationship is also present in a description by Klaus Nielsen (1998: 226) of a teacher–student relationship in a Danish Conservatory of Music, with a ‘context-sensitive dialogue which was not only verbally founded, but consisted, among other things, of examples, metaphors and narratives’.

A study at a Norwegian music academy confirms this variety in relationship between teacher and student. Based on interviews with six instrumental teachers, Johannesen (1997) drew these conclusions:

- All of the teachers stated that the development of a student’s independence as a musician was an important developmental task. With ‘independence’, most of them associated the students’ ability to assume responsibility for their own learning and development.
- There were important differences between teachers in how they regarded their own role in relation to the students’ development of responsibility. None of them, apparently, wanted a role as a dominating force. But within this small group of instrumental teachers, it was possible to identify a continuum of attitudes. At one end of the continuum was a teacher who left every major decision to the student. He presumed that the students were independent and responsible learners, and looked at himself as an available adviser. It was, for instance, up to the student to decide if he wanted to come to the lesson or not. This approach is a reminder of the approach taken by the English educationist Alexander Neill, at Summerhill School. Here, a theory of freedom based on Freudian psychology was the basis for an educational practice. Johannesen also identified teachers that revealed a more generally dominant behaviour in the teacher–student relationship.
- There were differences between the teachers’ opinions regarding the students’ responsibility for different types of learning task. For instance, they differed in how much responsibility they granted the student in technical training and development, or in developing and acquiring a repertory. Practice routines seemed to be left totally to the students’ own initiative and responsibility, however.

The question of independence of judgement in musical matters has also been studied by Hallam (1994). She described nine levels of musicians’ conceptions of the nature of interpretation, illustrating growing maturity and responsibility in judgement. Her levels ranged from the lowest one, where students placed ‘emphasis on playing correct notes, no consideration of interpretation’, through a middle level (no. 5) where ‘all styles and interpretations [are] accepted as legitimate and possible’, with level 6 to 9 formulated as ‘need to develop personal style and interpretations perceived’ (6), ‘initial commitment made in some area, perhaps by imitation of individuals eminent in the field’ (7), ‘implications of commitment perceived, and exploring of the subjective and stylistic issues of responsibility’ (8), and ‘own personal style of performance developed’ (9). Hallam interviewed twenty-two musicians (not students) and found that most of these professionals demonstrated at least a level-5 conception, but it is also evident that not all of them operated on the highest level.
What we have learned from this rather limited research is that we have teachers who demonstrate a variety of policies, from neglect of student initiative and responsibility to the full acceptance of such responsibility. Those who dominate the instrumental lessons seem to give their students limited possibility to assume responsibility for their own learning and musical development, and they seem to disregard or neglect highly accepted theories about the importance of active participation from the student for an optimal outcome of learning. On the other hand, to give or demand full responsibility in learning and musical decision-making from all students may also be dysfunctional for some of them. This is related to individual differences in personality, which is important for mastery of freedom to learn. I will return to this issue.

The study by Hallam also indicates that many professional musicians fall short of an ‘own personal style of performance’. In the most optimal meaning of the phrase, this may be a level reached by very few musicians. If few musicians reach this level, one reason may be that their teachers don’t allow them to develop independent musical values. Another reason is a pressure to conform, inherent in the musical and cultural society. Nigel Kennedy formulated a critique of a famous American academy of music, after finishing his period there, saying that ‘Such were the conventions that expressing yourself was even more frowned upon than back in England . . . There is a stench of raw ambition, of ruthless professional people only too happy to conform to whatever is musically suitable to succeed’ (cited in Persson, 1993: 3–4). I am sure that many of the students described here had a high level of responsibility for their own learning, but used this approach to adapt to the prevailing values and practices in their musical surroundings, thereby suppressing individuality and personal values.

This reminds us that not all students want the type of independence I have been seeking in these studies. They want to learn the prevailing conventions; they want to conform. Whenever that is the case, we have a serious problem, which is the relationship between individual, institutional, and economical and job-related values and practices; but that is an issue for a further article. Instead, I will return to another question: How do students react to freedom?

Do all students welcome responsibility and freedom in their own learning development? Do all students welcome responsibility for their own musical judgements? I have already suggested that this is not the case. My next reference to research is to a project in an academy of music in Sweden. Here, the aim of the project was to study a group of students who were given a high degree of freedom in making decisions regarding study aims and study progress (Brändström, 1998). The bases for this study were the theories of Carl Rogers, Jerome Bruner and Eric Fromm, all of whom emphasised the importance of freedom in learning and personal development.

The researcher was a piano teacher, and the piano students (at many levels of performance) started each term with a formulation of what elements in their pianistic skill they wanted to improve during that term, and the repertory they wanted to study. At the end of each term, they made an evaluation of how they had accomplished their aims, and they commented upon the importance of the project. They had no arranged time-schedule for lessons. The piano teacher was available on certain days for lessons, and the students signed up for a lesson when they found themselves ready for it.

The project was spread over six terms, with a total of fifty-three students participating.
for one or more terms. After these six terms, the pianist/researcher concluded that most of the students (about 80 per cent) reacted positively to the freedom they were given. On the other hand, some students reacted with anxiety in this situation. From the piano teacher’s view, the positive elements were well-prepared students in lessons, and a changing role for himself as teacher – from a dominating, pushing one, to a supporting and advising one. The most negative aspect was the unpredictable nature of his own work schedule: some days many students wanted lessons, other days very few, and often a student would cancel his lesson at the last minute.

Brändström’s study reminds us that personal responsibility and freedom in learning is not welcomed by all students. The psychological and sociological reasons for this have been discussed by, among others, the researchers mentioned above, and in other research on motivation, especially research on achievement motivation. My main conclusion is that we are constantly reminded of the individual nature of each person’s adaptability and willingness to take responsibility for his own learning, and the importance of the learning context.

The development of students’ musical independence

There is, of course, also a developmental aspect of students’ musical independence. Johannesen’s informants commented on how they gradually tried to transfer responsibility from themselves to the students. In his study in a Danish conservatory of music, Klaus Nielsen (1998) describes a technique used by several teachers that resembles the method of ‘scaffolding’. This concept was introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), and the concept is usually associated with Lev Vygotsky’s theory of ‘the zone of proximal development’ – the distance between the students’ actual development level and the level of potential development. To close the gap between these two levels, the teacher must give the students a ‘scaffold’, in Nielsen’s words, ‘The teacher structures an interaction by building on what he or she knows the learner can do’ (1998: 120). This is then supposed, over a period of time, to develop a co-operative interaction between teacher and student.

Klaus Nielsen (1996) describes also what he believes is a progression through three stages in the students’ development towards being a pianist:

- First, a level of taking over the musical tradition, where the learner is placed in a peripheral position. Critical questions are not welcomed. The teacher’s way of playing is dominating, and has to be internalised by the student before he can question this mode of playing.
- Then, a level of using actively the musical skills in student-organised contexts, mostly inside the academy. This gives the students opportunity to use their skills in different social contexts, which change the perspective and relationship to playing music. Nielsen (1996: 8) asserts that: ‘significant changes happen in the piano students’ learning trajectories when they engage independently and actively in the musical community of practice. They develop a more bodily based kind of reflection in which they relate to their own musical activities.’
- And a level of using the musical skills independently in professional contexts outside the academy of music, for instance in concerts or as teachers. This ‘changes the
students’ perception of themselves as students. They see themselves as musicians and relate in the final years of their study to the differences between the teachers, and use whatever they can for their own purpose’ (1996: 10).

The first level described by Nielsen corresponds to the dominant teacher approach. This is the only approach he describes for the teacher–student relationship, and he seems to imply that the development of independence and responsibility is an outcome of experiences the students have outside the context of the lessons. He regards these three levels as changing modes of being involved in the community of practice, relating his empirical research to the theoretical concept of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This is an interesting perspective, emphasising the learning context and the professional tradition in which learning takes place.

Nielsen proposes that the students progress through these stages. Even if we may question this and other aspects of Nielsen’s stage theory, it serves its main purpose: to put the developmental aspect of students’ independence and responsibility for their own learning on the agenda. This stage theory, when better supported and differentiated by empirical evidence, will be an interesting basis for reflecting on the developmental aspect of responsibility.

**Students on their own: efficient practice behaviour?**

Practising is an activity where the student is his own master. Usually, there is no teacher to monitor or dominate his practice behaviour. Now, at last, he is on his own, independent and responsible. Or is it more complicated than that? It certainly is, in my opinion. My question is now: are the students in higher instrumental education prepared to take responsibility for their practice regime? Before answering this question, I have to say that, with ‘planning regime’, I think of planning and organising one’s practice time and tasks, of the strategies for efficient physical and mental practising, and of the strategies for the evaluation of process and product (Jørgensen, 1995).

Looking at the amount of practice experience students have before they enter higher instrumental studies, it is tempting to conclude that they already have developed efficient practice behaviour. Ericsson *et al.* (1993) present results from a project concerning violin students in a Musikhochschule in Germany, showing that the students had accumulated a total of several thousand practice hours before entering the Musikhochschule. With so many hours of practice experience, and with such a high level of performance ability when they enter the Musikhochschule, they certainly have developed a range of practice strategies that serves their efforts to develop as musicians. This is also demonstrated in a study by Siw Nielsen (1999). But, is their knowledge of what they are doing, and why they are doing it, related to a sound knowledge of the fundamental learning strategies involved in practising? In most of the cases, I don’t think so. And without this knowledge, it is my hypothesis that they will develop a limited range of practice strategies.

I will support my assertion with empirical evidence from my research on practising. First: do students learn about efficient practice strategies before they enter higher instrumental training? Is their practice behaviour a result of deliberate instruction and
advice from their former teachers? Asking students entering my own academy how much their former instrumental teachers had emphasised practising, approximately 40 per cent of the students for three successive years said that their former teachers had put 'very little' or 'no' emphasis on practice behaviour. (This is in contrast to what teachers say they have been doing. See Barry and McArthur (1994), who report that 84 per cent of instrumental teachers in their study populations said that they 'always' or 'almost always' included specific instruction in 'how to practice' as part of their regular lessons.)

What happens, then, in higher instrumental education? I put the following question on a questionnaire to the students in my own academy: to what extent have you and other persons influenced the development of your practice behaviour during your study at the academy? Giving them a choice between six groups of persons and five levels of importance, 87 per cent of the students said that they themselves had a 'very high' or 'high' influence on their practice behaviour, and the remaining 13 per cent said that they had 'some' influence themselves. None of the students rated themselves with 'little' or 'no' influence. The teacher on their major instrument was rated by 61 per cent of the students to have a 'very high' or 'high' influence, while 19 per cent of the students said that their instrumental teacher had 'little' or 'no' influence. Other sources of influence, for instance other students, came up with a marked lower percentage of influence.

How do students evaluate the efficiency of their own practice behaviour? Asking 141 students at our academy if they were satisfied with the efficiency of their own practice, 2 per cent said that they 'always' were satisfied, 42 per cent said 'often', 50 per cent said 'sometimes' and the rest, 9 per cent, said 'seldom'. None said 'never'. Looking at this distribution, it is not surprising that many students want to learn more about practice behaviour. In response to another question, 108 of 141 students (77 per cent) mentioned one or more aspects of practice behaviour they wanted to learn more about. Efficiency and concentration were the most mentioned features.

Lastly, I will mention the pronounced individual differences in practice behaviour, both in duration and in several features of planning (Jørgensen, 1997 a, b, c). Even if we have to expect differences in personal values and study aims among these students, some of this variability may be interpreted as signifying a lack of knowledge that might structure and direct practice.

The general picture is that a high proportion of students in higher instrumental training has received little or no advice from former teachers on practice behaviour. This raises the possibility that many of their learning strategies are limited, or ineffective, not being subjected to reflection and discussion with an experienced teacher, and not being related to learning theory. Then, when they have entered the academy, students rate themselves as more influential than their instrumental teachers on their practice behaviour. Many of them are dissatisfied with the efficiency of their practice, and many want to learn more about practising.

I conclude that, whereas we might say that some teachers seem to be too dominating in lessons, thereby limiting the students' opportunity to develop independence and to take responsibility in learning and to make musical decisions, the opposite is the case for practising behaviour. Here, paradoxically, the absence of a teacher's influence, advice and discourse may limit the student's development of independence and responsibility. The teacher's traditional preoccupation with teaching, mostly neglecting the practice activity of
the students, obviously emphasises learning products over learning processes. The same emphasis on product is of course illustrated in the student’s concert performances. But, in my view, the learning process, mostly carried out during practice sessions, is as important as the product in an educational institution. It is here, when studying, that the students have opportunities to get advice and feedback on their learning behaviour, and to develop what I call a personal commitment and responsibility for efficient practice behaviour. My suggestion is that instrumental teachers should divide their time between teaching and observing students practice, thereby being able to discuss and develop students’ independence in practising.

**What is the institution’s responsibility?**

So far, my presentation has focused on students and teachers. I have made a short comment on the institutional context and tradition of learning, and it is now time to return to the institution. When talking about the ‘responsibility of the institution’, I am addressing the *leadership on every level*: all the people engaged in studying, teaching and administration – looking on them as a social group with only one thing in common, their affiliation to their institution. My concern is to emphasise that educational outcomes like independence and responsibility must not be looked at as a private matter, concerning only the individual student or teacher, but as official, institutional responsibilities.

I will discuss this proposition, using the concept of ‘institutional study quality’ as my tool. This concept has gained importance in recent years, and may give an indication of the qualitative level of an institution’s study programme, teaching and learning. Of course, there are different views of what constitutes ‘quality’, and how institutional study quality may be assessed. Concepts like ‘accountability’, ‘educational indicators’, ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’ dominate both the theoretical foundation of research and the discourse on this subject. My intention is not to go into all of the broad issues of study quality, but to question what I regard as a dysfunctional aspect of the life of many institutions: their neglect of the institutional responsibility for the development of the students as independent, responsible musicians and learners.

This may seem to be too harsh an accusation, and maybe it is. Institutions surely differ in their encouragement of independence and responsibility among students. I question the extent to which the issue of students’ responsibility for their own learning is taken seriously, and in what ways the institution, the teachers and the students involve themselves in a qualitative improvement of students’ learning.

Going through research on institutional study quality, it is illuminating to note the absence of research on the *student learning process* as a variable. For instance, Odden (1990) refers to a recommended American educational indicator system, developed for college assessment. Here, there are *educational inputs* (where teacher quality and student background are among the indicators); *educational processes* (including teaching and instructional quality, but nothing about students); and *educational outputs* (where student achievement of course is one of the indicators). My point is that in this conceptual frame of reference, student learning is totally absent. Twenty years ago, Pace (1980: 112), summarising American research on study quality in colleges, said: ‘The student is surely accountable for the quality of investment or effort that he or she makes in furthering his
own learning and development. Surprisingly, this dimension has rarely been measured in studies of student development and college influence. This assertion is still a good description of the status of research on students' learning in higher instrumental music institutions today: it is practically non-existent.

I have two recommendations based on the research presented in this article. First: the institution needs a thorough understanding of its dominant values, like 'what knowledge is of most worth', 'what is a good musician' etc. The importance of the prevailing values in an institution for what students learn, and how they learn, is demonstrated in a study by Kingsbury (1988) for an American institution, and by Roberts (1991) for Canadian university music faculties. There is, of course, an intricate relationship between explicitly formulated values, and values of a more tacit or hidden type, as well as between important and less important values. Added to this are the conflicts between values within the institution as a whole, and between groups of persons or between degree programmes. The latter type of conflict is demonstrated in my research about practice time. Here, students in the music education and the church music programmes used approximately 50 per cent more time to practise activities than expected in the curriculum plan, while the students in the instrumental degree programme practised as expected (Jørgensen 1997a). I take this as an indication that performance values are dominant in this study context, and more important than the programme-related values of education and church activities for these students. This conflict between teaching values and performance values is also demonstrated by Bouij (1998). Without an awareness of this and other dominant and conflicting values, an institution’s self-understanding is not realistic, and policies to improve study quality, and student independence and responsibility, will not have optimal conditions to succeed.

Second: the development of students who are independent and responsible both in their learning behaviour and in their musical judgements is not an educational outcome that simply happens. On the other hand, I don’t believe that this is a type of outcome that can be planned to happen. My point is that this must be an issue for the institution, first of all to put on the agenda for reflection and discussion and then to act upon. Even an institution with the very best of teachers cannot take for granted that every aspect of our difficult job as teachers is covered to its full extent by every teacher. And it cannot take for granted that all students enter a higher institution with self-confidence and an urge to take active possession of their own learning and development. So the institutional leaders are obliged to put student independence and responsibility on the agenda for institutional work. This might include several types of action, directed towards both students and teachers, and the institutional leadership. For me, one obvious area for improvement is a better understanding of the concept and process of ‘independence’ and ‘responsibility for one’s own learning’. Here, educational and psychological theories, based on empirical research, will be important tools. There is a range of such theories. One of them, already mentioned, is Vygotsky theory, where the development of independence is a crucial point, as is the social context for development. Cognitive learning theories about the self-regulation of learning, and the development of metacognition, are also important tools for a better understanding of, and practice in, the development of student independence and responsibility.
Conclusion

I am aware of cultural differences and disagreements concerning freedom and individual, independent action. The prevailing social, religious and human values in a society will strongly influence its educational system, including institutions for higher instrumental education. With this in mind, it is interesting to observe the differences in the relationships between teachers and students in the cases described by Persson, from an English institution, and the descriptions by Johannesen and Klaus Nielsen, from Scandinavian institutions. These cases are, of course, too few for a general conclusion about differences between English and Scandinavian modes of relationship between teachers and students to be drawn, but they remind us that discussions about students’ independence and responsibility must be carried out in a social context.

References