

# Contemporary Theorists in Music Education Assignment 2023: *Randall Allsup*

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One of the main reasons I chose Allsup to write about is that he started questioning traditional approaches of Music education in the late nineties. This resonated with me personally as I embarked on an Undergraduate Music program in 1997. At that time, Jazz and Popular Music HE programs were in their infancy, and only a handful of Institutions in the UK offered a degree in Jazz, and the places were in demand, which meant high predicted grades in A-Levels were essential even to achieve an audition. Despite having considerable experience in Jazz combo and big band performance, I felt I couldn't reach the next stage.

At the time, I also questioned the role of the traditional conservatoire, and its relevance towards what I wanted to do as a career, which was to become a session musician. Essentially a 'Popular music' musician.

This was an interesting and exciting period in the timeline of the development of Music education. Accredited Jazz and popular music degree-level courses were emerging throughout institutions, and Grades in popular music for Drums, Electric guitar and Bass guitar were developed.

In 'How popular musicians learn' (originally published around this time in 2001) Lucy Green argues that popular musicians learn in ways that are fundamentally different from classically trained musicians. I couldn't help but notice some of the similarities (on the surface at least) with some of Allsup's points.

*'The role of the teacher in popular music education is often less directive than in classical music education, and instead involves creating a supportive and collaborative environment that enables musicians to explore and develop their own musical interests and strengths'* <sup>1</sup>

Both advocate the exploration of collaboration and experimental learning methods, and both challenge the traditional ideas of what music education should be. They also both share the same philosophy on the student-centred approach and the positive role that technology can play in music education. <sup>2</sup>

Allsup covers many topics in-depth.

In this essay, I will attempt to discuss the key points I feel are most relevant to my own teaching practice;

- The Master/Apprentice model
- Democratic education
- The issue of 'Routine expertise'
- Critical pedagogy
- The Influence of Jazz Training

Randall Allsup began playing the guitar at a young age. He went on to study music education at the University of North Texas. He trained as a saxophonist and later earned a master's degree in music education from Indiana University.

He started his teaching career in public schools in Tennessee and Indiana, following the traditional method of teaching students a specific set of skills in order to become successful musicians.

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<sup>1</sup> Green, L (2017) *Popular music education in theory and practice*, Bloomsbury publishing

<sup>2</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p63

Over time, however, he began to question the effectiveness of this approach. In the late 1990s, Allsup began to experiment with new approaches to music education. He taught in New York and felt there was a disconnect between the world he was living in and what he needed to do as a teacher and the type of pedagogy being talked about in education at the time. <sup>34</sup>

*'I am concerned that aspects of institutionalised music participation have embedded within their forms certain basic divisions that obstruct rather than enhance the general good of the students in our care.'* <sup>5</sup>

Talking about his cohorts and student music teachers in the US, he hoped to *'Recapture a sense of wonder and surprise that has been trained out of too many music students'*. He argues that *'It can open up spaces for students to explore and enrich their own musical interests and practices, and it can do so in ways that are equitable, inclusive, and socially responsible'* <sup>6</sup>

He felt he needed to do something different to connect with his students and wanted to re-conceptualise music pedagogy.

He sees the re-conceptualisation of music education as moving away from focusing solely on technical proficiency and that it *'requires us to challenge traditional hierarchies and power structures, and to create more inclusive learning environments'*<sup>7</sup>

Essentially emphasises the need to move beyond traditional approaches that focus on technical mastery and instead on a more inclusive approach that values creativity and collaboration. He talks about this in detail in his 2002 dissertation titled *'mutual learning and democratic action in instrumental music education.'*<sup>8</sup>

Here, he explores this idea of a more democratic approach to instrumental music instruction than has been offered in the past, rejecting some of the more traditional ways such as the Master/Apprentice approach which prioritises technical skill and individual achievement over anything else. He promotes more openness and suggests mutual learning, collaborative creativity and critical reflection help to engage students with the social and cultural contexts of playing music.

*'Democratic learning seems to benefit both cognitive and skills-based development while encompassing broad humanist values of fairness and equity'* <sup>9</sup>

To achieve this, he suggests teachers should alter their focus from being 'experts' imparting knowledge to students, to being collaborators who learn alongside their students.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://musiconlinehybrid.tc.columbia.edu/faculty/randall-everett-allsup/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://randallallsup.academia.edu/>

<sup>5</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett, *Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise* *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, pp. 5-24

<sup>6</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p3

<sup>7</sup> Moore, Robin D 2017 *College Music Curricula for a New Century*, Oxford University Press p1

<sup>8</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett. "Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2003, pp. 24–37. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3345646>.

<sup>9</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett. "Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education." *Journal of Research in Music Education*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2003, p5

*'Democracy requires collaboration, and it must involve more than just adults-its practice should incorporate the rights and opinions of both teachers and students. .'* <sup>10</sup>

He is essentially saying that we should be aiming to educate well-rounded and informed musicians and that instrumental tuition in the past has been too single-mindedly focused on technical prowess and individual achievement.

I certainly have met many adults who have been put off by the idea of playing a musical instrument through the draconian methods used by an instrument teacher as a child. Not only does this have an effect on the persons' belief in themselves as being musical in any way, but it can have a serious effect on musical appreciation, and even anxiety-inducing, bringing up traumatic memories and such.

In addition, Allsup encourages social and cultural histories to be critiqued through the teaching of music in order for exploration and reflection on the ways in which music has shaped society and continues to do so.<sup>11</sup>

Allsup's emphasis on Democratic Education is particularly relevant today, where many students are disengaged from traditional forms of schooling. Maybe this ties in with the surge in technology use in the classroom and in general. Many students today feel more engaged with their devices than their immediate peers, and the need felt to communicate face-to-face is diminishing. This makes an interesting juxtaposition between the advocacy and promotion of technology and the idea of democratic education whereby collaboration, creativity and student centred-ness would be much harder achieved if relying on technology alone. I would argue that, in this case, technology would be largely redundant and promote face-to-face, in-person collaboration. This would help with the requisite skills needed in the real world of music, for example in an orchestral setting, one must be extremely aware and willing to react at any given moment, to the conductor or other players in the section. Also, it would be far more productive in ensemble collaboration to try things out and bounce ideas around in real-time, rather than relying on latency-plagued streaming or time-consuming recording and sharing.

In 'Remixing the Classroom', Allsup explores the potential of the uses of technology to transform music education. In essence, digital tools and online resources can help to create a more interactive and inclusive learning environment better suited to the needs and interests of today's students. He describes the music classroom as more of a laboratory where *'We can grow within our traditions, becoming ever-finer musicians, while experimenting with the surprises that attend a life of openness and curiosity.'*<sup>12</sup> Where *'Law remains a guest, where Lawmaking and Lawbreaking are a form of play.'*<sup>13</sup>

He achieves this by challenging the Master-Apprentice model of teaching.

*'The law is abetted by institutions in which deferred entry through an endless series of doors and doorkeepers is an accepted norm, each door more difficult to get through and each doorkeeper more powerful than the last. This is the Master-apprentice model.'* <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Allsup, R. E. (2003). Mutual Learning and Democratic Action in Instrumental Music Education. *Journal of Research in Music Education*. P4 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3345646>

<sup>11</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy* p 56-60

<sup>12</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p 65

<sup>13</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p 89

<sup>14</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* pp.9-10

He contrasts two different models—a clothing designer (Dapper Dan) who creates unique pieces by altering and remodelling existing designer items, and a Sushi master (Jiro Ono) who has been using the same traditional methods he was taught 50 years ago. Allsup seeks to debunk the myth that there is only one way to create a musician and that an open dynamic is the way forward. Dapper Dan crossed the perceived boundaries of his specialism by being open and ingeniously creating, whereby Jiro Ono has a very ‘closed form’ way of working. After watching the film about Jiro (*Jiro Dreams of Sushi, 2011*)<sup>15</sup> I noticed that it wasn’t just his work that had this ‘closed attitude’ to. He took the exact same train at exactly the same time as he had done for 50 years, assuming he has lived in the same place, he hasn’t changed his routine, despite living and working in Tokyo, which has seen the most dramatic changes in economic and technological progression in these 50 years. Maybe his actions and behaviour are rooted in a more ‘closed form’, more in common with the ethos of his generation and upbringing. Allsup challenges this approach by talking about boundaries and ‘border crossing’. He argues essentially that our boundaries as musicians and educators can sometimes block our openness to individuals’ ideas and ways of engaging with others. The idea of gradually pulling apart the assumptions and boundaries of teaching and re-examining them.<sup>16</sup>

Seiji Ozawa the acclaimed Japanese conductor, and of a similar age to Jiro Ono (87 and 97 respectively) talks about self-assertiveness, and essentially attempting to break the mould or think creatively is sometimes looked down upon by general society in Japan.<sup>17</sup>

*‘Japanese musicians have their own strengths—they work well together, and they study very hard. This can assert itself in both positive and negative ways. When people are openly self-assertive in Japan, we say ‘Deru kugi wa utareru’ (The nail that sticks out gets hammered down).’*<sup>18</sup>

Allsup talks about ‘border controls’—who sets the laws and rules? How can we open up these rules and critique them. Also ‘border crossing’—How can we generate spaces and practices in which we can explore and go beyond the expected, the known and the controlled?<sup>19</sup>

I personally think that at least some of the master-apprentice dynamic must be observed. If a skill set has been ‘mastered’, many pitfalls, techniques and hard lessons learned can be quantified in order for the student not to have to navigate these factors themselves, and a more productive path can be laid out. With the actual word ‘Master’ used within this context, it means a master of a certain practice, however, we have to be careful with this definition as it has quite obvious connotations of subordination or server. In any case, the implications are that the master is of a higher order. To which extent this power is used/accepted is largely down to the protagonists, however, the general hierarchal power is an issue that resonates with Allsup:

*‘The problem with the subordination model is that it limits students’ creativity’. This model also reinforces the idea that the teacher is the sole authority in the classroom and that students should not question or challenge the teacher’s decisions’*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jiro Dreams of Sushi. (2023, July 3). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiro\\_Dreams\\_of\\_Sushi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiro_Dreams_of_Sushi)

<sup>16</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* pp 106-113

<sup>17</sup> Murakami, Haruki, 2016 *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa* , pp318-322

<sup>18</sup> Murakami, Haruki, 2016 *Absolutely on Music: Conversations with Seiji Ozawa* , p318

<sup>19</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* pp.126-30

<sup>20</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p12

Allsup touches upon the idea that the master/apprentice model is a '*vocational model of music education, with specialists teaching future specialists.*'<sup>21</sup>

I can see how some institutions may be reluctant to change this model as it perpetuates certain ethics embedded into the institution and, if the apprentice becomes the master and is employed by the institution, it can then boast a successful employment rate amongst graduates in an increasingly competitive profession.

*'Few would argue that the structure of music-teacher Mastery remains more than a vestigial part of the fabric of post-Enlightenment capitalist ideology, a winner-take-all episteme that extols virtuosity, celebrity, cost-effectiveness, and hierarchy-based roles.'*<sup>22</sup>

In his article 'Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise',<sup>23</sup> Allsup tackles the issue of musical over-expertise within instrumental tuition. He argues that teachers often rely on routine expertise, which involves repeating the same methods and techniques without adjusting their approach for each individual. He argues that this can lead to stagnation within the learning practices delivered with little professional development.

He questions teachers engagement in the process of ongoing professional development and calls them to question their own assumptions about teaching or to seek out new knowledge and ideas.

He claims there is a problem of a historically-validated pedagogy that leads to narrow specialisation and that '*most formally-trained musicians are prepared as routine experts.*'<sup>24</sup>

He argues that the importance here is in the training of Music teachers. How important is solely promoting routine expertise at the expense of everything else that Music can offer? He discusses the '*terrible potential for routinization to deaden musical experience specifically, and life generally.*'<sup>25</sup>

I would argue here that quite a few teachers I know (including myself) often discuss ideas around continually adapting our methods to engage students and that this practice is commonplace nowadays. In recent years, there has been a more inclusive approach to recruiting students from varying economic, social and cultural backgrounds, which has resulted in challenging traditional methods of a 'one size fits all' kind of tuition. I have experienced students who are extremely competent technically but have no grounding whatsoever in harmony or theory. The challenge here is to find innovative new pathways to direct the student towards, which may be in direct contrast to more traditional methods.

Allsup is currently a professor of music at Columbia, however, is still involved in instrumental tuition, teaching teachers, and philosophy of music and arts education, creativities and democratic music education, social justice and equality.

He believes the improvisational nature of Jazz can provide a beneficial model for music education in a broader sense. Maybe the idea of dissonance, '*odd pairings*' and '*purposeful muddling*'<sup>26</sup> has something to do with his Jazz interest and training. Jazz has always been about re-defining the

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<sup>21</sup>Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* p67

<sup>22</sup>Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM Toward an Open Philosophy of Music Education* p67

<sup>23</sup> Allsup, Randall Everett  
Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise  
Philosophy of Music Education Review , Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 5-24  
Indiana University Press

Allsup,R.E Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise  
Philosophy of Music Education Review , Vol. 23, No. 1, p14

<sup>25</sup> Allsup, R.E Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise, p15

<sup>26</sup>Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* pp 12,13

old methods and remixing them into new ideas and experimenting with these new concepts. The idea that dissonance can also be harmony, is the same way that a B natural and a C natural sound dissonant when played together, however in the context of a C maj7 chord, sounds rather harmonious.

When playing Jazz, musicians are encouraged to explore their own creativity and be ultra-aware in order to converse in a collaborative and spontaneous way with their counterparts. Allsup argues that this approach can be applied to other genres, and in Music education in general. He advocates creating *'the irreducible classroom, to profit from a teacher's unrepeatable moment in time and the confluence of these students with you and me at this place and this time.'*<sup>27</sup>

When I was observing a series of third-year Jazz repertoire lectures recently, the teacher conducted the lectures entirely in this manner. There was a structure and obviously material that was intended to be covered, but often a question by the student or an example given by the teacher would direct the lesson on a positive new tangent.

Allsup is also a performing musician and composer. He has witnessed in real-time the change in the needs and requirements to stay 'in the game' of being a professional musician today and has witnessed the changes in the profession due to outside influences such as changes in recording technology and the internet/social media. His experience as a performer and composer has given him a personal perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing aspiring musicians. He believes that music should be about more than just the acquisition of technical skills. It should be about developing creativity and the ability to improvise and innovate. He believes students should be encouraged to explore their own musical interests and develop their own unique styles.

## CONCLUSION

'Remixing the Classroom' is very much written in the style of the ideas and theories which Allsup promotes. It's open and questioning and encourages the reader to question the boundaries and borders which exist in traditional music education. He is saying there are border controls and crossings, but we can do something about it to open them up.

*'As much as I can, I want to live in the tension between my reading and your intentions, in the third space between your efforts to clarify and my search for another way to see and hear.'*<sup>28</sup>

It seems that Allsup is continually questioning what is perceived as the norms, and seeks to not look beyond them, but in between them.

*'I have lived dialectically in the great tension between freedom and responsibility'*<sup>29</sup>

As music is becoming continuously more subjective, and as more diversity and with technology no doubt playing a large part, it is important to continuously evolve pedagogy to ensure music students of the future don't fall through any cracks educationally speaking. Allsup seems to do this by seeking out and discussing examples of pedagogy where this has the potential to happen and offers ways in which new approaches can be implemented.

*'I remain passionate about the capacity of school for fostering the in-betweenness'*<sup>30</sup>

I wonder, however, if the classrooms nowadays have been over-remixed! I have observed lectures at degree level, where basic knowledge of music theory has not been demonstrated. There is also

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<sup>27</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* p10

<sup>28</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* p118

<sup>29</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* p126

<sup>30</sup> Allsup, Randall Everet, 2016, *REMIXING the CLASSROOM* p106

the argument that a student studying an instrument at degree level will eventually be working within an extremely competitive field, and must have the necessary skills to survive. If the student has a well-rounded appreciation of music that's all well and good, but can they earn a living and pay back tuition fees from this? Allsup is no doubt aware of this, however, it does perpetuate the Master/apprentice hierarchy. If we can somehow dilute this process through the engagement of teachers from more diverse backgrounds, what is wrong with having two or even three different instrumental teachers for the same instrument? Different methods of learning will be imparted, and one method may be engaged with more purposely than another.

*'New instructional environments can be created when the apprentice hi-jacks a course of study and reorders the Master's codes. A Law-breaker, such an artist may seek to redefine cultural achievement by de-privileging the standards of another, creating her own definition of excellence.'*<sup>31</sup>

His emphasis on student-centred learning, remixing, technology, cultural diversity, and social justice has helped develop important student skills and competencies. Allsup's work is also a valuable resource for teachers who want to promote creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving in their students, and who wish to gain a deeper understanding of music and its role in society. However, I feel the most important thing is that he promotes the idea that every Teacher is an individual with their own experiences. And by continually questioning methods, new theories can evolve and be explored without having to stick to a perpetual hierarchical approach, which ultimately could exclude many would-be musicians from a lifetime enjoyment of music in its many forms, which would no doubt be detrimental to the future inclusion and enjoyment of music in society.

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<sup>31</sup> Allsup, R.E Music Teacher Quality and the Problem of Routine Expertise  
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