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# Teachers' Conceptions of Improvisation in Teaching: Inherent Human Quality or a Professional Teaching Skill?

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## ABSTRACT

This article is based on a qualitative case study of teachers' conceptions of improvisation in teaching. Empirical data are master student teachers' texts (transcripts, reflections) based on observations and interviews of practising teachers. The texts were analysed in an abductive process. We can identify four specific characteristics of how improvisation in teaching is conceived; improvisation of design, improvisation in communication, and improvisation dependent on repertoire and context. However, teachers experience severe challenges in their improvisational practices, e.g. with regard to their knowledge base, the accountability agenda and teacher autonomy. Therefore, we argue that improvisation should be part of teacher education.

## KEYWORDS

Disciplined improvisation; teacher education; teaching skill; teacher's role

## Introduction

### Vignette

*For me, improvisation is essential in teaching. From being a teacher who always had a scripted framework and great plans for my lessons, I am now the opposite. At the back of my mind, I have an overarching superior plan with competency aims from the Knowledge Promotion Reform, together with the plan for my teaching in the subject this year. The first thing I do when entering the classroom is to look at the students. How are they today? How is the noise level? How are the fellowship and climate in the class? These factors show me, as their teacher, what methods I have to use in this lesson. The elements materialise and become relevant as the lesson unfolds. (In-service MA student, ICT02)*

Since the early 1990s, there has been wide-scale international discussion on the question of quality in learning and teaching in education (Bransford & Darling-Hammond, 2005; Shulman, 1987; Shulman & Shulman, 2004). Recent trends in international research on teacher education seem to focus increasingly on the importance of teaching quality, rather than teacher quality, and the need for teachers to 'learn to do with uncertainty as teaching in this manner is partially improvisational' (Knight et al., 2015, p. 106). Even if there seems to be consensus about the importance of focusing on teachers'

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improvisational skill in situations (Sawyer, 2011a; Van Manen, 1986), we still do not know what this really means or the extent to which it can or should be described and implemented in teaching and in teacher education as a key concept and, consequently, as a professional *teaching skill*.

Our current research context has given us an opportunity to focus on the question of what it means to become an improvising teacher (Berk & Trieber, 2009; DeZutter, 2011, p. 29ff; Karlsen, 2006; Sawyer, 2011b). In our recent three-year research project, *Improvisation in Teacher Education (IMTE)*, funded by the Research Council of Norway and conducted in a Norwegian teacher education environment, improvisational performance was seen as an overarching concept to study and develop teacher education as a collaborative, dynamic and relevant practice. Its relevance as a research topic is illustrated in the opening vignette above in which an in-service MA student claims to rely considerably on improvisational skills when entering the classroom. The case study we present here is built on empirical data from the review phase of the IMTE project. In the review process, we involved our in-service MA teacher students who observed and interviewed practicing teachers in our university college region with a special focus on improvisation in teaching. We analysed the students' field notes and reflection texts, and in this article, we discuss the extent to which improvisation can be described as a teaching skill that can be learned and rehearsed or whether it might be described as an inherent common human quality that teachers use in their daily work. Our research question is: *What kinds of conceptions of improvisation as a professional teaching skill can be identified in in-service MA students' research-based descriptions and reflections on teaching?* Based on our findings, we shall discuss the implications for the teacher's role and for teacher education.

## Theoretical Perspectives

### *The roots and applications of improvisation*

The concept of improvisation is applicable to several professions and traditions (Holdhus et al., 2016). In education, however, there has been little focus on the different characteristics of improvisation (DeZutter, 2011; Jarning, 2006, p. 217). *Improvisus* is a Latin word, which means 'the unforeseen' (Karlsen, 2006, p. 242; Montouri, 2003) or 'to provide the unexpected' (Dehlin, 2008, p. 25). To improvise is to be open to new perspectives and actions, with an expectation for what is not yet, but which can be realised (Dehlin, 2012). We often think of improvisation as an everyday activity, i.e. intuitive and spontaneous actions in a challenging situation.

Lobman (2011) argues that teaching has been dominated by scripts based on curricula and meta-scripts in society, implying that to become a good teacher is to follow the transmission model of teaching and learning. She argues that it is time to alter this on the basis of a constructivist theory of learning. Improvisation in education is seen as a required skill for such a development (Lobman, 2011, p. 73; Sawyer, 2011b) and can be inspired by what Holdhus et al. (2016) have labelled as the three root traditions of improvisation as a professional skill: the rhetoric, the music and the theatre tradition. Improvisational practices in the music and theatre traditions have strongly influenced educational theory and practice.

In the field of education, improvisation is often seen as an applied, specific teaching tool or skill developed in the profession of teaching where it can be learned and rehearsed (Berk & Trieber, 2009). However, several researchers underline the importance of having a broad approach to our understanding of improvisation, arguing that improvisation is interwoven in everyday life (Dehlin, 2008). In his study of improvisation in everyday organising practice in a large Norwegian hospital, Dehlin argues that improvisation is a hallmark of being human, characterised as ‘the improvising man’. Improvisation is connected to spontaneity, emotionality and creative action in using tools (Dehlin, 2008, p. 42-43); it is a practical phenomenon that occurs in situations where some kind of action needs to be spontaneously decided on. You need to use a relevant vocabulary, and improvisation includes memories and language (Dehlin, 2008). Dehlin’s concept of improvisation, therefore, seems closer to describing improvisation as inherently human rather than as a skill that can be learned and practiced professionally.

### *Improvisation as a teaching skill*

In education, there is no common understanding or definition of a teaching skill. Karlsen (2006) argues that improvisation in teaching is a meeting, in a broad sense, with ethical implications, referring to Martin Buber’s concept of ‘I and You’ (Buber, 1992; Karlsen, 2006, p. 252). This meeting cannot be predicted and is thus vulnerable. The teacher must meet the students with respect and integrity, a meeting that represents an asymmetrical power relation (Karlsen, 2006, p. 254).

Descriptions of improvisation in teaching vary from the ability to make spontaneous decisions and solve problems, there and then, to the enactment of concrete instructions regarding what to do. This means that teachers’ conceptions and practice of improvisation must be related to discussions about value-based instructions regarding what to do in school and about curriculum contents and teaching skills.

A skill can be defined as the mastering of a concrete problem, e.g. in mathematics, or more generally as developing new literacy competences. What is seen as a modern and relevant teaching skill might vary in different epochs and contexts. In a recent Norwegian ministerial white paper, NOU 2015: 08, *Fremtidens skole [The School for the Future]*, the overarching question was: what competences are needed in future schooling? According to the white paper, the focus of future schooling should be based on four competences: subject-specific competences, competence to learn, to communicate and interact and to explore and be creative (Ludvigsen, 2015). To us, these competences seem to increase the relevance of the concept of improvisation as a teaching skill because the focus is on the dynamics of professional education connected to communication, interaction and exploration.

Using the concept of *disciplined improvisation*, Sawyer underlines that we must understand good teaching as a balance between structure and freedom (Barker & Borko, 2011, p. 279; Sawyer, 2011b). Teachers must improvise to handle challenges in the twenty-first century, with a focus on creativity, critical thinking, innovation and problem-solving, underlining students as active participants and co-constructors of knowledge. Thus, there must be a good balance between plans and free improvisational practice (Sawyer, 2011b).

As part of the main IMTE project referred to earlier, the research project group, in which the authors of this article were participants, described what we listed as four dimensions or aspects of improvisation: 1) *structure and design*: a dimension characterised by teachers' handling, altering and carrying out sequences of lessons on the basis of spontaneous input from students or contexts; 2) *communication and dialogues*: a dimension characterised by how teachers develop and carry out learning-focused dialogue with students on the basis of spontaneous input; 3) *repertoire*: a dimension characterised by teachers making contextual and learning-focused choices of examples and activities in lessons on the basis of their professional subject-oriented and didactical knowledge/orientation and 4) *context*: a dimension characterised by teachers establishing an improvisational practice in a certain domain, theme or context (Holdhus et al., 2016). Three of these dimensions – structure and design, communication and dialogues and repertoire – can also be understood as descriptions of individual teaching skills, whereas the fourth aspect – context – describes the significance of specific environments for the enactment of such skills.

## Method

### *About the case study*

Twenty-one in-service MA students at our university college carried out an assignment about teachers' conceptions of improvisation as a teaching skill as part of their course in qualitative methodology in the autumn of 2013; they wrote texts based on observations and/or interviews with teachers in different schools. The informants were teachers in our university college region, selected by purposeful sampling or strategic sampling based on the assumption that they could give useful insights in the field (Johannessen, Tufte, & Kristoffersen, 2010, p. 160; Merriam, 2009, p. 77-78; Patton, 2002).

Our study is inspired by Yin's case study research design, on the relationship between the findings and preliminary theory in the field (Yin, 1994, p. 20), and ethnography (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1996), with a focus on actors' descriptions, interpretations and meaning-making (Kvale, 1997; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

The in-service MA students' observations and interviews were conducted in primary and lower secondary schools (13), upper secondary schools (5) and in teacher education (3). The teachers represented different subjects: English language, Norwegian language, religious and ethical education, physical education, service and communication, mathematics, adapted learning, stage and audience, food and health, music, dance and drama, art and design and instrumental playing. Some of the schoolteachers were newly qualified, some had taught for a few years, and some had extensive work experience. Most of the students worked individually, but some worked in groups. Our role was to present the task to the students and to guide them in the initial phase.

After the in-service MA students had completed their course, we analysed their texts, looking specifically for descriptions of improvisatory teaching practices that could confirm, contradict or supplement our theoretical understanding of improvisation in teaching, building on the four analytical dimensions and on a comprehensive literature review of improvisation (Holdhus et al., 2016). The texts were coded and analysed by

means of hyper research in an abductive process, going from theoretical perspectives to a more grounded approach, and vice versa, to ensure a critical eye (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Yin, 1994).

Our data consist of interviews and observations from the in-service MA students. Our students, who come from a great variety of teaching backgrounds, collected their data by observing and interviewing practicing teachers. However, they also interpreted these data and wrote their reports while enclosing transcripts of observations and interviews with teachers. Our data therefore consist of two levels: one where the in-service MA students analysed and reported according to a specific assignment and another in which we, as researchers, analysed the reports and the enclosed transcripts. On both levels, we circled around the three following questions: What is improvisation in pedagogical practice? What teaching skills can be characterised as improvisational? What is the potential and/or limitations of improvisational knowledge and skills in teaching? By using both observations and/or interviews, we argue that the in-service MA students' texts provide a rich data source, which is relevant for our understanding of the concept of improvisation and may contribute to analytical generalisation, defined as 'striving to generalize a particular set of results to some broader theory' (Yin, 1994, p. 37), in this case, the theory of educational, professional improvisation.

## Findings

The dimensions or characteristics of improvisation in teaching emerging from the empirical material were frequently connected to the central concepts presented by Holdhus et al. (2016), such as *structure and design*, *communication and dialogues*, *repertoire* and *contexts*. Moreover, the informants frequently described implications for *the teacher's role*. We will present and discuss the findings in detail in what follows.

### *Improvisation as a teaching skill*

Improvisation can be described as an inherent human quality, representing all daily communication and human qualities, and as a professional practice with certain quality criteria that can be learned, trained and evaluated (Dehlin, 2008). This dual position is evident in our data. Improvisation in teaching is understood as a relatively frequent practice, which can be described on a continuum from seldom to 'all the time'. With regard to planning teaching and improvisation, the findings show three different groups of relationships: 1) Some teachers say that they approach things directly, having no plan, or only a very general plan, before entering the classroom; 2) Some teachers say that they have a plan for the lesson but that this plan is often altered during the lesson; and 3) Some teachers say that they have planned to allow room for sequences that include improvisation.

Most of the teachers associated improvisation with the (jazz) music tradition, but some of them also referred to improvisation as a more general term related to human communication. Improvisation was associated with spontaneity, variety and creativity. For most of the teachers, it was associated with a positive understanding of being active as well as with the lucky experience of having 'saved' the lesson, suggesting that improvisation was used as a last resort out of a problem. A few of the

informants said that they were aware of the risk that improvisation might result in nonsense. It seemed, however, that many of the teacher informants looked at taking risks as something they had to avoid and not something that could be an essential characteristic of improvisation. We might conclude then, on one hand, that improvisation was understood as inherently human. On the other hand, it seemed to be difficult for some to define and explain this inherent quality and to separate and describe it as something conceptual and theoretical in their professional practice. Thus, our findings confirm that improvisation exists as part of a teacher's practice, with specific characteristics, although not established as a professional concept, described and reflected on.

### **Specific aspects of improvisation as a teaching skill**

#### **Structure and design**

The structure and design dimension of improvisation focuses on the teacher's dilemma between making scripts and planning and the freedom in following or enacting such scripts (Sawyer, 2011b). In educational theory, theorists have focused on the skill required to act on 'teachable moments' occurring (planned or accidental) with 'pedagogical tactfulness' (Jarning, 2006, p. 227; Van Manen, 1986; Van Manen, 1993).

In the data from the observations and interviews, the structure and design dimension in improvisation was repeatedly commented on. The teachers said that they very often had to alter plans, themes, orders, sequences etc. Some tried to ignore interruptions, but most of them had a 'plan B'. The reasons for such changes could be (the lack of) student responses or classroom equipment that did not function, often the PC.

*In the lesson we observed, the teacher had planned that the students would start with individual work and thereafter work in groups. Some students only did group work in this lesson as they had already finished their individual work. The teacher could not foresee this, and the crossing became improvised in the situation. The teacher improvised the composition of the working groups according to when they completed their individual work. It was thus accidental which students were placed in the different groups. Some students did not manage to wrap up their individual work. The teacher then found that to avoid students working away from the others, he had to stop the individual work in order to have time for the group work. Thus, he had to improvise. (In-service MA student, ICT04)*

In general, improvisation was described at the lesson level, allowing more time for unplanned activities, teachers' and students' composition of working groups or the changing of plans and activities. Very few gave examples of improvisation as part of interaction and collaboration with colleagues. On one hand, such collaboration could make it easier to change plans, but on the other, if it resulted in unpopular additional work for colleagues, it was difficult to realise this. The notion that teachers would encounter situations that would require them to change their plans seems to be deeply rooted in teachers' reflections of their own profession. They seem to be living in a double bind, where, on one hand, structures are seen as limitations, and to follow scripts means 'bad teaching'. On the other hand, structures and scripts represent a positive framework and continuity for the students' progressive learning.



### Communication and dialogues

It might be argued that all human communication and dialogue are inherently improvisational (Dehlin, 2006; Dehlin, 2012; Karlsen, 2006, p. 242). In our study, all the teachers underlined the value of communication and a good dialogue between teachers and students/pupils, and some of them said that teaching and learning always included improvisation. There were, however, some differences in having a subject focus or social relations as a 'point of departure' for improvisation. All the teachers spoke of the importance of listening, openness and understanding, however, this also meant to take a chance; for instance, when asking questions to engage students, you never know what they will answer. Most of the teachers emphasised their responsibility to get students 'on the right track' again or to counsel them using the 'right' questions and positive feedback. Carrying out an improvised dialogue seemed to be a strategy available for teachers to develop a positive learning environment, but the view of the teacher's role varied from underlining the teacher's responsibility for what was going on and leading the lesson to arguing that teachers and pupils are on the same level, with equal power to set the agenda and develop dialogue. However, some of the intended and planned dialogues ended up more like structured questions and answers, or monologues, incorporating the teacher's initiation, students' response, and the teacher's evaluation. Here, the teacher had the power, reflecting that there had to be some kind of asymmetry (Karlsen, 2006, p. 254).

Improvisatory dialogical practices were weaved into different actions in the lessons. In the field notes, we found learning dialogues between the teacher and students about how to solve problems, for example, how to make a shirt collar. In another situation, however, it seemed that the teacher could also choose to close the dialogue:

*Student (S) and teacher (T) (in an upper secondary school lesson in design):*

*S: 'Ornament is a crime'*

*T writes this on the blackboard*

*T, turning to the class: 'What does that mean?'*

*S: 'Less is more'*

*T writes*

*S, without raising her hand: 'functionalism' ... is it that?'*

*T: 'Yes' (in-service MA student, PEL01)*

It seems relevant to say that dialogical improvisation challenges teachers to reflect on ethical questions regarding relationships and communication (Karlsen, 2006). Several of them emphasised their responsibility as teachers to develop a good and respectful learning milieu (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2015; Utdanningsdirektoratet, u.å.).

### Repertoire

In all improvisational traditions, there is a focus on how to build repertoire. The use of examples is understood as an essential tool for developing, learning and understanding. Our informants highlighted the utility of having a *toolbox* with a variety of examples in the shape of methods to motivate, visualise and demonstrate.

Such a toolbox could contain toys for learning, study techniques, project work, different digital tools, different plays, quizzes, PowerPoint presentations, different types of tasks, learning activities and strategies, drawings, storytelling and using their body in different ways. Some of the informants commented that the Internet represented a very positive



contribution to their toolbox. Several of them said that having more experience meant that it was much easier to improvise than when they were novices:

*You have a much broader register from which to draw experiences. When you are giving a lecture, you bring up many associations and examples. When I had just finished my education, I got very nervous when I recognised that ..., oh ..., this does not work. (Teacher, ICT05)*

It is difficult to say how teachers' repertoires were related to students' own construction of knowledge. Teachers with greater levels of experience seemed to have developed a rich and varied repertoire, which they could adapt in different situations, but age and experience were probably no guarantee for improvisation.

### Context

The contextual aspect of improvisation, which focuses on context domain or subject, is highly comprehensive, and we found relatively few comments describing it. However, the informants described special challenges in relation to their ability to handle everyday situations:

*Improvisation is necessary because every day we encounter situations that are full of new demands. We have to adjust to new demands from the curriculum, subjects, learning content, students, teachers and situations. (Teacher, ICT03)*

Developing content knowledge learning in themes and subjects seemed to be important, and teachers in lower and upper secondary schools especially referred to an extensive curriculum that results in time pressures. The teachers talked about their responsibility to follow the curriculum and guidelines for exams, both on a national and local level. However, some of them interpreted the curriculum as a compass for directions rather than specific rules to follow in detail. These teachers found room for improvisation. However, some of them claimed that there were differences between subjects in terms of the space and potentiality for improvisation, depending on whether the curriculum focused on creativity or on tests and achievements. Some informants argued that in subjects based on facts, improvisation was less relevant than in, for example, religion/ethics and other social subjects. Subjects, assessment, time pressure and the lack of collaboration among teachers seemed to limit room for contextual improvisation. On one hand, teachers commented that the curriculum underlined students' rights and ability to be active participants; on the other hand, it created many limitations for teachers. One teacher stated that there was no space for improvisation in school, but another said 'We improvise all the time!' Thus, our assumption is that context seems to differ significantly and depends on how teachers understand their role.

To sum up, improvisation was reported and described both as an inherent human quality and a professional teaching skill in structure and design, communication and dialogues, repertoire and context. However, the spread in teachers' descriptions of what improvisation teaching is and can be suggests to us that this diversity might be rooted in different beliefs about what teaching per se is and can be. In what follows, therefore, we shall discuss improvisation in relation to central aspects of a professional teacher's role.

## Discussion

### *Improvisation as a professional quality: The teacher's role*

Over the past 15 to 20 years, there have been great changes in expectations regarding the teacher's role and how best to develop twenty-first century skills in school, as influenced by challenges in the risk society (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012; Mausethagen, 2015; Sawyer, 2011a). The debate on 'core practices' in teaching and teacher education seeks to identify a common language and relevant pedagogies for novices, often focussing on planning, scripts and teaching skills (McDonad, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013, p. 381). We argue that professional improvisation, as described and practised in several professions (Holdhus et al., 2016), should have an important place in such a debate (DeZutter, 2011; Rindal, Lund, & Jakhelln, 2015).

Mausethagen (2015) points to three central aspects of being a professional teacher. The first is *responsibility and accountability*, meaning that teachers have to be responsible and accountable to their students. Teachers must be active in taking care of their students and colleagues in a productive and positive learning milieu, but they also have to meet and fulfil different expectations and demands from society, especially regarding test results and the current guidelines for assessment. The second aspect is *knowledge base*, which means that teachers have to develop research-based and well-founded pedagogical knowledge. This knowledge base can be developed both in formal and informal education, but workplace learning in school seems particularly important. *Autonomy* is the third aspect; teachers have to develop their autonomy along with the ability to make well-founded professional choices and build on professional knowledge, ethics and didactics. Thus, the teacher's role seems to be challenged by both external and internal demands and expectations. This might influence how they understand and integrate improvisation as a professional skill.

Mausethagen (2015) argues that a new generation of student teachers might ask for new basic educational perspectives on how to become a good teacher. It seems, however, that both novices and experienced teachers still have to live with dilemmas regarding their role (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 70; Sawyer, 2011b), including exploring the concept of improvisation.

Most of the teachers in our study understood improvisation as a professional skill with certain characteristics, like structure and design, communication and dialogues, developing a repertoire and something contextual. However, several of the informants reflected on dilemmas both within and between these dimensions, especially relating to the aspect of being responsible and accountable for what was 'going on' and how to get the lesson on 'the right track' again. Thus, it seems relevant to say that our teachers' understanding of responsibility and accountability challenged their conceptions of improvisation and vice versa.

### *Improvisation versus responsibility and accountability*

Mausethagen notes that the Norwegian School Quality System (2004) gives expert guidelines on being a professional teacher (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 36); in particular, the Knowledge Promotion (KP06), with a huge body of competence aims, might help teachers to ask what is going on in school and what the teacher's role is. However, the

concept of improvisation does not seem to be part of this formal quality system. Thus, one might ask how our teachers legitimate improvisation as part of their responsibility and/or accountability. Several of the teachers' answers reflected that improvisation was a concept characterising, in a relevant way, what goes on in their professional practice in school. However, it was not unexpected that some of our informants did not seem to have such a differentiated improvisational vocabulary (Dehlin, 2008) but instead represented a common sense, intuitive understanding of improvisation. The reason for such a limited understanding could be that these teachers had not reflected on the potentiality of the concept (Holdhus et al., 2016) as part of their teacher practices and education.

Most of our informants focused on the dimension of structure and design when reflecting on their conceptions of improvisation. It seemed to be surprising to discover that, according to theories of improvisation, you are 'allowed' to make plans as part of improvisation, but you have to reflect on your freedom and the need to alter these plans. If the teacher's focus was on plans only to secure his or her accountability in learning results, we would argue that the aims of improvisation were overly restrictive.

The question of responsibility and accountability in improvisation was, however, not unexpected because planning and scripting lessons and teaching have been among the most important skills that a teacher can achieve (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 70; McDonad et al., 2013, p. 379), perhaps thinking that a central characteristic of improvisation is *not* to make plans or to put them aside.

Several of our teachers underlined their responsibility to improvise in relation to an individual student, with the aim of realising adaptive learning. However, this was not always an explicitly articulated pedagogical aim, and it accounted for some of the teachers' dilemmas when regarding improvisation as collaborative learning. Some focused on the teacher's need to be improvisational with the whole class, with the aim of developing a collective, positive learning milieu to realise adaptive learning in a larger context. It was, however, somewhat unexpected that most of the teachers did not refer to improvising in collaboration with other classes or groups since, in the past 15 to 20 years, there has been a strong focus on teamwork in the school as an organisation (Roald, 2012; Senge, 1999). Instead, it seemed to be more of an individual responsibility.

Several of our teachers seemed to understand improvisation as the opportunity to achieve variation in lessons but not as representing a deeper form of learning or exploring new dimensions of a subject. This could be a kind of double communication as some of the informants referred to the assessment guidelines in a positive manner, even though these guidelines could also be seen as restricting improvisation.

When discussing responsibility and accountability in improvisation, it is also relevant to note that there were some differences between teachers' conceptions of improvisation in different subjects. Some teachers argued that it was easier and more relevant to improvise in arts or practical subjects. In subjects with a greater focus on discussion, like the social sciences, you can improvise. The clearest differences seemed to be between teachers in lower and upper secondary schools and those in primary schools, with the argument that there was 'no time to waste', especially in upper secondary school. The reason for this was probably that improvisation was interpreted as social play, nonsense or intuition, not as a tool for deeper learning (Ludvigsen, 2015; Rindal et al., 2015), probably with a negative influence on students' learning results. Others,

however, discussed the importance of improvisation in developing positive social relations.

Some of our informants seemed to be positive about improvisation and felt responsible when improvising on the basis of sociocultural perspectives (Dewey, 2008; Dysthe, 2001; Säljö, 2001). Both local and national tests seemed to limit the teachers' experience of freedom in improvisation. However, teachers underlined their loyalty to the given curriculum (Mausethagen, 2015) and did not improvise to explore their freedom to take risks and cross borders in developing the curriculum.

For some of the teachers, the different local and national guidelines seemed to delegitimise their personal responsibility in improvisation (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 63). This might be because the teachers are overly dependent on existing plans, textbooks and so on and lack the capacity or will to develop their own instructional materials. We thus argue that there is room for this in the framework of the national curriculum, but perhaps there is an increasing scepticism regarding external and internal control and teachers' accountability. However, an increased focus on accountability can also be seen as a sign of change in the new generation of teachers and student teachers, accepting that more control and the demand for good results (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 95) can be balanced with the aim of creativity and innovation (Sawyer, 2011b).

Our informants argued that experienced teachers had a somewhat basic trust and security in facing the demand for results as well as being responsible and accountable. New sociocultural perspectives on teaching and learning might be seen to have the potential to broadly legitimate improvisation in becoming a professional teacher. Here, we have to add that it seems important to get support from school leaders and colleagues in understanding improvisation as an important aspect of developing a positive learning milieu in the school as an organisation.

### *Improvisation as part of developing a knowledge base*

In recent years, teachers' knowledge base has been questioned (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 82), especially their use of research-based knowledge. Our informants agreed with the ideal of developing an improvisational repertoire. However, they did not focus on what we might call research-based knowledge, per se, but more on 'what functions' in practice in the classroom. They also expressed their loyalty to students. Some of the teachers focused on pedagogical knowledge connected to emotions and relations (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 88), others on subject content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) to develop deeper knowledge in the school context (Holdhus et al., 2016; Ludvigsen, 2015; Rindal et al., 2015). This contextual dimension seemed to be very important for our informants, although they were not frequently explicit in expressing this. This ideal of knowledge-based improvisation could, however, also be troublesome, for example, when a student teacher was unable to help a student because he or she lacked the relevant content knowledge.

Mausethagen (2015) argues that teachers have to 'take a grip' of their own field of knowledge while listening to different voices and representing democratic and ethical values. To improvise, it seemed important for the teachers to develop different resources, but the challenge is to be updated as improvisation did not

seem to be a priority area for the schools. Thus, there seems to be a need for different actors to develop knowledge in collaboration. Here, our teachers seemed to have a challenge to include humour, play and creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2011, p. 97; Sawyer, 2011a; Steinholt & Sommero, 2006). This focus on creative learning and teaching seems to be an important aspect of becoming an improvisational teacher. To carry this out, our informants had several ideas, such as games, stories, physical exercise etc. However, it seemed a challenge that much of this was ‘tacit knowledge’. An important aspect of the teacher’s role is thus to explore and name such tacit knowledge, to find and develop new arenas and provide room for rehearsal, training and formative assessment. More experienced teachers, in particular, might play a central role here, being able to both plan and script teaching and to improvise (Sawyer, 2011b), in developing an improvisational climate and arena for practicum teachers, students, (novice) teachers, student educators and student teachers.

### ***The autonomous and improvisational teacher***

To become an autonomous teacher is to be able to make decisions, to have the capacity to realise one’s intentions and to be accountable for the results (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 109). In recent years, there has been a wide-ranging discussion about teachers’ potential to be autonomous.

In Norway, the Education Act and the Knowledge Promotion Reform regulate teachers’ autonomy, but autonomy is not only something ‘given’ by the school system when one secures a job as a teacher, or becomes a student teacher; it is also something you might acquire based on loyalty and trust, accountability and responsibility (Mausethagen, 2015).

Traditionally, autonomy has been interpreted as a teacher’s freedom to choose methods based on his or her teaching of the national curricula, described in terms of learning outcome. The curriculum offers great freedom for the local school, the individual teacher or a team. However, it seems that this individual autonomy is reduced by both local and national school authorities (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 107-108). Seemingly, the curriculum (KP06) has reduced teachers’ autonomy as some of our teachers in upper secondary schools said there was absolutely no room for improvisation. It seemed clear that discussing how to be an improvisational teacher had challenged the informants’ sense of autonomy. Some teachers said that they had the freedom to give their students the opportunity to construct their own learning while others said that they were responsible and accountable for students’ learning. Their autonomy to improvise was legitimated by reference to professional ethical values, first and foremost to take care of pupils/students. However, very few reflected on their freedom to implement more radical changes in their lessons, to take risks and to experience failures. It is difficult to say whether this relates to their pedagogical values or whether it is a sign of professional laziness or insecurity.

We might argue that overall freedom in improvisation – no restrictions in planning and design, communication and dialogues, developing repertoire and being contextual – might be the ultimate sign of autonomy; however, based on the literature and our

research findings, it seems fruitful to develop our understanding of teachers' role in improvisation in light of the paradoxes uncovered.

### *Implications for teacher education*

There has been extensive discussion regarding whether and how one can learn to be a teacher and develop teaching competence (Tolo, 2011) and what this means regarding formal teacher education. Our findings suggest that disciplined improvisation should be seen as a professional teaching skill. Thus, it has to be integrated in student teachers' knowledge base and form part of the discussion regarding their responsibility, accountability and autonomy.

Given that improvisation is not addressed in the current steering documents for Norwegian schools or teacher education, we might ask whether, and how, student teachers can develop professional improvisational competences or skills. It seems that expert teachers develop this improvisational ability when practicing in 'the real world' in schools, although it is not communicated in a proper way (Karlsen, 2006; Sawyer, 2011b). This implies that improvisation needs to be added to the agenda as a collaboration between student teachers, teacher educators and practicum teachers, not only as a theoretical theme, but also with practices in different situations and at different levels.

There is now a strong wave of reforms in teacher education in Norway, altering both structures and subject content on the basis of research and experience. In the Norwegian White Paper no. 11 (2008-2009) *Læreren, rollen, utdanningen* [*The Teacher – The Role and the Education*] (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2009), the focus is on increased quality, especially in research, teaching and learning. Subject content competence, didactical competence and relational competence are central aims (pp. 21, 47-48).

A national research group has followed the development of the recent teacher education reform. Their conclusion focuses on the need for deeper, research-based teaching and learning (Følgjegruppa for lærarutdanningsreforma, 2015). This is in accordance with the aim of improvisational theory to strengthen subject competence by building a repertoire of examples and methods (Holdhus et al., 2016). There is, however, no explicit focus on improvisation in the new steering documents, and we find it highly relevant to seek a discussion about the potential of improvisation in the teacher education reform (in terms of didactics, subject knowledge, interaction and collaboration, rehearsal and research) because Norwegian teacher education will from 2017 become a five-year course at the master's degree level. It appears to be a challenge as well as a new opportunity to get the concept of improvisation on the agenda. However, when discussing implications for teacher education, we have to remind ourselves that school reforms are complex (Ertesvåg, 2012), and there has to be change at the national, regional and local levels (Shulman & Shulman, 2004). It seems highly relevant to focus on improvisation in national steering instruments, the curriculum, guidelines for assessment, structures in the educational system of teacher education and the resources required to carry out research since a central aim in teacher education is for it to become evidence-based (Mausethagen, 2015, p. 83).

As mentioned earlier, our informant teachers provided many comments on the teacher's role, but they had few comments on the implications for teacher education



in their reflections on the concept of improvisation in teaching. Some said that they had not learned about improvisation in their teacher education programmes, and several explained that they had learned to improvise as an inherent part of being a teacher in school, as a kind of lifelong learning in the school arena (Postholm, 2012).

Based on our study, we focus primarily on improvisation in teacher education at the local level – in terms of the curriculum and collaboration between student teachers, teacher educators and practicum teachers in concrete contexts – to develop a productive and positive learning environment (Säljö, 2001). Experienced teachers and teacher educators have to collaborate with student teachers to combine practice and theoretical reflections (Barker & Borko, 2011, p. 293). Student teachers must thus get the chance to observe, explore and try out improvisational practice in an environment they trust. In teacher education, one has to develop a toolbox and train in and reflect on improvisation (DeZutter, 2011, p. 48).

We argue that such reflections are a hallmark of becoming a professional, improvising teacher. However, the vignette presented in the introduction illustrates that improvising is risky. We may thus ask whether teachers and student teachers simply move from an ‘instructional ditch’, focusing on scripts and skills as core practices, to a radical ‘constructivist ditch’, focusing on freedom and creativity. It seems important to engage student teachers, practicum teachers and teacher educators to reflect on both the potential and limitations of disciplined improvisation, thus developing their knowledge base, their responsibility and accountability and their autonomy.

### Concluding remarks

We began this article by asking whether improvisation in teaching could be regarded as an inherent human quality or a professional teaching skill. Having identified four central characteristics of teachers’ conception of improvisation – structure and design, communication and dialogues, developing a repertoire and contextual improvisation – we found that teachers see improvisation as a practical teaching skill that relates to their basic educational view. As a profession, teaching is indeed practical. It manifests itself in actions that are at the core of what we consider as the teaching profession. Our conclusion is that practicing teachers and teacher educators must collaborate with student teachers to create opportunities and arenas to develop their understanding of improvisation as part of their teaching role (DeZutter, 2011). However, there is no linear route from no improvisation to constant improvisation. Teachers have to balance the teacher, learning and curriculum paradoxes in the different characteristics of improvisation as an ongoing process. Even if our empirical study has methodological limitations, the theme and findings are highly relevant for illustrating three central aspects of teachers’ role. Teachers face challenges in how to manage the adoption of improvisation in productive learning dialogues regarding how one comes to be ‘in charge’, as well as in their seemingly limited autonomy to develop the curriculum, especially assessments and time guidelines. In schools as well as in teacher education, there seems to be a need for arenas to expand teachers’ conceptions of improvisation and to make them aware of ‘blind spots’. In teacher education, the actors need the freedom to highlight and reflect on the concept of improvisation as a *risky* teaching skill. It seems that the dialogical and contextual



dimensions are the most challenging for teachers to handle in practice as these focus on everyday communication and dialogue in a concrete, thematic context. The challenge is to develop a solid knowledge basis with a repertoire to meet different and unforeseen situations. We need further research and discussions about the concept of improvisation as a teaching skill and how to realise this in practice. Students' learning and comfort must remain the focus, and teachers in practicum schools, student teachers and teacher educators are challenged to reflect on their responsibility and accountability regarding improvisation, not only in class but at all levels of the school as an organisation.

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