



UWS Academic Portal

Gentle riffs and noises off

Pirrie, Anne; Manum, Kari; Necib, Saif Eddine

Published in:
Journal of Philosophy of Education

DOI:
[10.1111/1467-9752.12368](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12368)

Published: 10/09/2019

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication on the UWS Academic Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Pirrie, A., Manum, K., & Necib, S. E. (2019). Gentle riffs and noises off: research supervision under the spotlight. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12368>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UWS Academic Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact pure@uws.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

"This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Pirrie, A., Manum, K., & Necib, S. E. (2019). Gentle riffs and noises off: research supervision under the spotlight. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12368>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions."

<https://authorservices.wiley.com/author-resources/Journal-Authors/licensing/self-archiving.html>

Gentle riffs and noises off: research supervision under the spotlight

We are time. We are this space, this clearing opened by the traces of memory inside the connections between our neurons. We are memory. We are nostalgia. We are longing for a future that will not come.

Carlo Rovelli (2018) *The Order of Time*

Introduction

The starting point for this essay was an improvised, dialogic exploration of doctoral supervision as a process of reflexive inquiry, presented by two of the authors at a research conference. On that occasion, we proceeded on the basis of our lived experience, in the here and now (or the there and then). Then as now we were projected into our respective roles as supervisor and PhD student by a malign casting director, in a university environment dominated by ‘a particular kind of audit culture that is having very damaging unintended consequences’ (Collini, 2017, p. 36).

We began by taking a stand, literally. We are now taking a stand metaphorically, by attending to the theme of research supervision in a manner that rejects the *status quo*, namely the consumer model of education. This is characterised by clear divisions between roles (e.g. the supervisor and the supervisee) and a narrow instrumentalist focus (e.g. securing ‘employability’ and moving towards completion). The approach elaborated below entails honouring the full range of lived experience that provided the initial impetus for this essay. Drawing upon Olsson’s work on education as a morally transformative process (Olsson, 2018), we consider the process of research supervision as an experience held in common, that is to say as a way of discovering the world together rather than the mere fulfilment of discrete roles within a clearly defined timeframe.

These are the gentle riffs and ‘noises off’ that feature in the title. They also signal the arrival of a third author, a former classical musician who is now embarking upon a PhD. The development and refinement of the musical analogies explored below took place through a series of conversations and written exchanges between two of the authors. These informed our joint exploration of the transformative nature of the supervision process. They also served to keep lived experience centre-stage. As befits the object of inquiry, ours was an improvisatory and collective endeavour to which the essay form is particularly suited. According to Adam Phillips (2013), ‘the essayist is the writer who extricates theory from science, who can write about method without method, who can write truthfully without needing to know what the truth is. ... The essay [is] perhaps the form that keeps making links between curiosity and sociability.’ This essay is a testament to our enduring curiosity and sociability. Our aim here is to cast new light on the theme of research supervision as a worthwhile human activity that plays out in and through human interaction. In essence what we propose below is an alternative ontology of research supervision, rather than a coherent model of alternative academic practice. We explore the process of research supervision (and by extension the nature of academic inquiry more broadly) as processes of ‘unselfing’ rather than as activities that are characterised by conformity to a regulatory framework and informed by the dictates of institutionalised systems of monitoring and surveillance. Such an approach also implies rejection of the relentless focus on choice and action that is

characteristic of institutionalised higher education in the UK and elsewhere. In respect of research supervision, we believe that there is scope for greater consideration of ‘the influence that more elusive aspects of being human, such as desires, fears, and dreams have on our ability to deliberate and act accordingly’ (Olsson, 2018, p. 165). Central to Olsson’s work is the notion of ‘unselfing’, which is drawn from the thought of Iris Murdoch. The latter defines unselfing as a process ‘... wherein [one] learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself’ (Murdoch, 2003, p. 17). Olsson (2018, p. 165) argues that unselfing is a ‘morally transformative process characterised by engagement and attunement to the surrounding world that highlights an interwinement of goal and process’. We suggest that unselfing might be a fruitful optic under which to consider research supervision, particularly when aligned to the modes of music making that we explore below. Our lived experience suggests that transformative research supervision is also characterised by engagement and attunement to the surrounding world, and that goal and process are more thoroughly intertwined than conventional accounts of the ‘PhD journey’ might lead us to believe.

It is important to recognise that such entanglement in the world of things brings with it other conceptual challenges that we shall touch upon only briefly below. For instance, a reappraisal of research supervision in a manner that foregrounds the continuous refinement of perceptions and interpretations of one’s surroundings and interactions with others calls into question the pre-eminence of the Newtonian order of time. Time is commonly regarded as something that flows uniformly, independently of things and their relations. This is the temporal orbit within which research supervision is generally located. Needless to say, the approach to supervision explored in this essay is profoundly at odds with the manner in which educational space and time are currently structured in the academy. The latter tend to be oriented towards the maintenance of the *status quo*, i.e. the fulfilment of narrowly circumscribed roles and responsibilities, and the maximization of the productive forces of autonomous individuals along a pre-determined trajectory of inquiry, played out within a specified timeframe. This applies to other practices in academia, such as the process of securing research grants, assessing the quality of teaching or research outputs, but we are not concerned with these here.

Writing with specific reference to the UK but in terms that have broader application, Stefan Collini (2017, p. 37) has argued that one of the by-products of the ever-increasing marketization of the university sector is ‘an agnosticism about human ends and a consequent downgrading of reasons as opposed to preferences’. As a prelude to a more embodied consideration of our theme, we draw briefly on some examples from the literature to consider the extent to which this phenomenon is evident in research and scholarship relating to PhD supervision. For instance, the emphasis on ‘supervisory styles’ (Deuchar, 2008), processes of ‘academic acculturation’ of doctoral students (Elliot et al, 2016a; 2016b) or the role of social capital in the process of being and becoming a research supervisor (Maritz and Prinsloo, 2015) only serves to maintain the *status quo* rather than to advance a radically different and more affirmative conceptualisation of what is involved in the process of research supervision. The approaches outlined briefly above imply that the relationship between PhD supervisor and research student is a one that can be controlled or planned. In the right conditions, and with due diligence to ‘training opportunities’, this pedagogical relationship can offer the possibility of stability, comfort and ‘student satisfaction’. By putting the emphasis

on individual agency, these approaches suggest that we are protagonists in the narratives of our own lives. Difficult situations can be ‘managed’ or resolved if both parties are in possession of particular skills that can be acquired by participation in training. Perhaps more importantly from the point of view of the argument advanced below, such approaches fail to direct due attention towards research supervision as a *social* process, that is to say as a particular form of being-in-relation that has a moral dimension, and thus cannot be quantified or subjected to the ruthless logic of metrics and performance development. As Olsson (2018, p. 167) points out, ‘education is something larger and more unpredictable than the alignment of designs for learning situations and predicted learning outcomes.’ This is borne out by our lived experience in a variety of interconnected roles, as supervisor, supervisee, colleagues and co-authors.

In an article on the centrality of the event to educational experience, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2017, p. 850) argue that fidelity to the event ‘installs a particular attitude towards life and might bring about a messianic interruption of time.’ They argue the current educational order is a ‘productive regime that does not tolerate that we lose ourselves, that we truly follow a passion’ (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2017, p. 857). As we shall see, following a passion, opening ourselves up to the ‘mysteries and doubts of life’ (Todd, 2015, p. 252) entails breaking with the Newtonian idea of time as ‘an entity that runs in a way which is uniform and imperturbable’ (Rovelli, 2018, p. 60). It implies a reinstatement of the Aristotelian notion of time as the measurement of change, in the context of a vision of education as a ‘broad personal, intellectual and moral cultivation ... an exploration of the world and one’s relationships in it and a process of refining perceptions and interpretations of the surroundings’ (Olsson, 2018, p. 164). The independence of the autonomous subject is supplanted by a growing realisation of interdependence. There is a change in focus from ‘isolated actions and decisions towards attention and attunement’ to the environment (Olsson, 2018, p. 167). Is not without irony that we note that time is running out, and that we must muster the argument in order to proceed.

Variations on the theme of time’s arrow

We believe that it is important to explore the topic of research supervision in and through interpersonal relations, rather than in relation to the flow of chronological time, or ‘time’s arrow’. The latter expression is convenient shorthand for a vision of temporality that is reduced to the chronological dimension, to movement through ‘absolute, true and mathematical space’ rather than to *kairos*, time as lived experience that honours the ‘relevant, apparent and common’ (Rovelli, 2018, p. 62). It is fortuitous that the expression ‘time’s arrow’ alludes to the damaging consequences of the narrow focus on efficient ‘progression’ along a pre-determined educational ‘pathway’ and the attendant neglect of time as lived experience. In short, time’s arrow wounds. It can put pressure on relationships. There are ‘milestones’ to be reached and ‘progress reports’ to complete if the ‘student journey’ is proceed smoothly, or rather is to be perceived to be proceeding according to plan. Considering research supervision as dynamic interplay between and amongst persons is particularly important at a time when at institutional level there is increasing emphasis on systemic levers of efficiency. These may take the form of training for supervisors and research students; or the introduction of ever more sophisticated systems for monitoring and accountability in relation to students’ ‘progression’ in the context of their ‘PhD journey’.

Through recourse to a musical analogy, we hope to illustrate how these mechanisms reflect a particular conception of time as something that flows, carrying us along in the stream of life. They mainly serve to ‘compose’ us, or rather to make us prisoners of measured time in a culture that is increasingly dominated by audit and accountability.

There is evidence to suggest that such a conception of time is profoundly misguided. The theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli (2018, p. 3) explains the gradual disintegration of conventional notions of time in the following terms:

We conventionally think of time as something simple and fundamental that flows uniformly, independently from everything else, from the past to the future, measured by clocks and watches. In the course of time, the events of the universe succeed each other in an orderly way: pasts, presents and futures. The past is fixed, the future open ... And yet all of this has turned out to be false. ... What we call ‘time’ is a complex collection of structures, of layers.

By the same token, we suggest that research supervision is a complex collection of structures and layers rather than something practised by a supervisor in relation to a supervisee within a pre-determined timeframe. In what follows, we shall explore the claim that the current emphasis on what we term *systems thinking* has been at the expense of *process thinking* in relation to interactions between persons engaged in a supervisory relationship. We also consider the extent to which the privileging of systems thinking in the contemporary university has been at the expense of the more nuanced conception of time. This has been present since antiquity but has re-emerged recently as a result of work in the area of theoretical physics. As Carlo Rovelli (2018, p. 1) elegantly suggests, time is not an external force that ‘hurls us towards life then drags us towards nothingness’. Rather it is something that resides within us. We suggest that ‘systems thinking’ in relation to research supervision is associated with a particular order of time that does not do justice to the lived experience of those engaged in the process. In so doing, we advance the view that PhD study is more adequately regarded as an *induction into a particular form of life* rather than as seamless progression along a time-line that ends in the award of a higher degree in a climate characterised by low levels of social trust. This lack of trust is inscribed in the very language we use, at least in English, when we say that one party takes responsibility for ‘supervising’ the other, or that the student ‘defends’ her thesis.

The Norwegian eco-philosopher Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng (2002) distinguished between traditional systems thinking, which is grounded in Western rationalism, and a philosophy grounded in process thinking. The latter is ‘alive to ‘a stream of movements and changes, processes and tendencies that cross and intermingle to form the complex’ (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 102). In so doing, Setreng invoked the distinction between the complicated and the complex. Building upon Setreng’s work in relation to creativity, jazz improvisation and communication Bjørn Alterhaug (2004, p. 102) offers the following distinction between these two terms: ‘the complicated can be compared to a machine based on reversibility – a closed system – controlled from a centre.’ A complex system, on the other hand is one that is ‘open and irreversible, self-organising, grounded in interaction, comparable to an eco-system’ (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 102). We suggest that this distinction between the complicated and the complex opens up new prospects for exploring the nature of research supervision through the lens of musicality and musicianship

in a manner that challenges rather than reaffirms the *status quo*. We suggest that it might be fruitful to regard research supervision as a complex process that happens *in the course of performance*, rather like jazz improvisation. Both take place in relation to others. Neither is a unilinear process that is subject to systemic modulation by the actions of a ‘conductor’ who directs operations (a supervisor or postgraduate co-ordinator, perhaps).

Needless to say, the vision of research supervision that we are attempting to develop here runs counter to the current institutionalised preoccupation with atomising research students’ activities and plotting them along a pre-determined timeline. It also reveals the unwitting deterministic bias that is evident in attempts to classify supervisors as ‘facilitators’, ‘directors’ or ‘critical friends’ (Deuchar, 2008). Moreover, the view of research supervision that has arisen from the interplay of our own lived experience is incompatible with the conventional institutionalised understanding of time as synonymous with chronology and ‘progression’. The ‘systems vision’ of research supervision entails monitoring progress in terms of aggregating individuals’ achievement at regular intervals, up to and including the point of completion of the ‘PhD journey’ and the award of a degree. All this takes place (or rather runs its course) within a clearly calibrated timeframe that is determined in advance. (In the UK, this is typically 27 or 36 months, with ‘progress reviews’ at frequent intervals.) Our days are numbered, literally and metaphorically. As well as generating pervasive anxieties in respect of ‘measuring up’ and ‘submitting on time’ this approach fails to take account of the elasticity of time in our personal experience. ‘How long is forever?’ asked Alice. ‘Sometimes just one second’, replied the White Rabbit. As Rovelli (2018, p. 52) points out, sometimes the very opposite is true, for instance in the case of dreams that last ‘an instant in which everything seems frozen for an eternity’. No doubt some readers will have experienced these moments of epiphany during supervision sessions when ‘hours fly by like minutes’. Conversely, there are these less fortunate occasions when ‘minutes are oppressively slow, as if they were centuries’ (Rovelli, 2018, p. 52). The latter experience seems increasingly common in the Wonderland of the contemporary university.

We suggest that the lived experience of research students and their supervisors has less to do with the *course* of things and more to do with the *life* of things: in short, less curriculum, more *vitae*. Alternatively, with reference to the musical analogy pursued below, what seems to be required is less orchestration of the operative order of things and more jazz: more swing and blues notes, call and response vocals, polyrhythms and improvisation. Perhaps now is the time to ‘stay in the now’ and take a closer look at all that jazz and the temporal dimension it inhabits.

From orchestration to jazz: the complicated and the complex

In *The Order of Time*, Rovelli (2018) explains the legacy of Einstein’s theory of relativity in clear and lucid prose, offering the reader a cogent critique of the Newtonian order of time. These advances in our understanding of time have a direct bearing on our variation on the theme of research supervision. Like time and jazz, research supervision (and the process of writing about it) is perhaps more adequately conceptualised as the interweaving of dances made to different rhythms:

The single quantity ‘time’ melts into a spiderweb of times. We do not describe how the world evolves in time: we describe how things evolve in

local time, and how local times evolve *relative to each other*. The world is not a platoon advancing at the pace of a single commander. It's a network of events affecting each other. ... Time has lost its first aspect or layer: its unity. It has a different rhythm in every different place and passes here differently from there. The things of this world interweave dances made to different rhythms (Rovelli, 2018, pp. 16-17) (emphasis in the original).

Drawing on his experience as a jazz bass player, arranger, composer and academic, Bjørn Alterhaug (2004) further explores the distinctions between systems and process thinking, the complicated and the complex, by comparing and contrasting the *modus operandi* of the symphony orchestra and the jazz ensemble. He suggests that the manner in which a symphony orchestra operates serves as a metaphor for systems thinking. The jazz combo, on the other hand, is emblematic of process thinking. There are a number of other key differences between the two that are worth bearing in mind here. The symphony orchestra has a hierarchical structure; it is located firmly within a tradition of musical notation. Moreover, the movements of the musicians are 'orchestrated' and 'conducted'. The written score also plays a fundamental role (when it comes to PhD supervision one might say that one 'knows the score'). However in the context of orchestral music it would be erroneous to suggest that that which emerges from the interactions amongst the musicians is merely the sum total of the notes played by individual performers in a pre-determined order with significant variations in tempo. In short, the musicians play *in concert*. What arises is more than the sum of its parts. The movement that emerges is a journey away from self-centredness and 'knowing the score'. By the same token Olsson (2018, p. 166) argues that moral cultivation entails a 'disassembling of grand ideas of one's independence, and a realisation that one is always entangled in affections, feelings and influences from the external environment'.

Rovelli (2018, pp. 156-157) draws upon the writings of St Augustine in relation to music in order to present a lucid analysis of the conundrums that underlie our perceptions of time. The crux of the argument can be summarised as follows: if we are always in the present because the past is past and has therefore ceased to exist and the future is yet to arrive, how can we be aware of duration? In Book XI of the *Confessions*, St Augustine concludes that we come to know so clearly about the past even though we are always in the present because 'it is within my mind ... that I measure time. I must not allow my mind to insist that time is something objective'. Time, therefore, is integral to the mind rather than an extraneous entity. According to St Augustine, this is most clearly illustrated by how we experience music. As Rovelli (2018, pp. 157-158) explains:

Music can occur only in time, but if we are always in the present moment, how is it possible to hear it? It is possible, Augustine observes, because our consciousness is based on memory and on anticipation. A hymn, a song, is in some way present in our minds in a unified form held together by something – by that which we take time to be.

In short, we are all time containers in which the past, present and future weave together continuously. We suggest that research supervision is also based on (shared) memory and anticipation, and is not solely oriented towards a pre-ordained future in a manner that externalises it from the lived experience of the particular participants. We carry within us memories of previous relationships, previous projects.

Let us now explore the musical analogy in little more depth, in order to cast light on how research supervision is institutionalized in the contemporary academy.

Knowing the score

Alterhaug (2004, p. 100) describes how the rise of the formal concert hall in the 19th century brought with it increased specialisation and professionalism in the realm of music: ‘most musicians confined themselves to the note-for-note playing of scores written by a handful of composers who somehow had access to the mysterious and godlike quality of the creative process.’ In the case of jazz improvisation, on the other hand, something happens in the course of performance and is not written down on paper. In jazz, the separation of functions that is evident in the classical distinction between composition and performance no longer obtains. Alterhaug (2004, p. 101) explains with reference to the African origins of jazz that improvisation is inclusive, interactive and dialogic: *the musician is the message* (our emphasis). He underlines the importance of bringing forth ‘personal, individual voices, inviting others to make their contribution and to be open to all directions and possibilities such dialogues and interactions may take’ (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 101).

This description invokes the idea of attention elaborated by Iris Murdoch. This she defines as a ‘just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality’ (Murdoch, 1997, p. 327). The idea of attention as a central part of moral life speaks to the moments where things happen imperceptibly between musicians (and by extension between academics and students). These are moments in which the materiality of performance influences interpretations and choices. As Murdoch (1997, p. 329) explains, ‘if we consider what the work of attention is like, and how continuously it goes on, and how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round us, we shall not be surprised that at the crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over’. In contrast, some of the literature on research supervision displays a naïve belief in the virtue of rational choice exercised prior to entering into a dialogic relation, e.g. whether the supervisor casts herself as a ‘facilitator’, ‘director’ or ‘critical friend’. As indicated briefly above, this unwitting deterministic bias is also evident in the Bourdieusian perspective on the business of ‘becoming and being’ a postgraduate supervisor (Maritz and Prinzloo, 2015).

If we attune ourselves to the possibilities of the metaphor of jazz for thinking about the nature of research supervision, we come to recognise that this emphasis on the individual is not necessarily at the expense of the collective. On the contrary, as Alterhaug (2004, p. 101) explains, ‘behind these actions and activities, which involve communities of practice full of joy and sorrow, there is a deep sense of belonging to a collective of local identity where nature plays a decisive part’. By the same token, research students are aware of belonging to a larger collective. This is consistent with a view of PhD research as induction to a form of life. The following definition of jazz improvisation, drawn from a seminal text on understanding jazz culture (Berliner, 1994), warns against the dangers of positing a rigid dichotomy between forms of music that privilege notation and those that privilege performance:

Improvisation involves reworking pre-composed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and *transformed under*

the special conditions of performance thereby adding unique features to every creation. (Berliner, 1994, p. 241) (emphasis added)

We contend that in relation to research supervision, the predominance of systems thinking, in the form of ever more extensive and intrusive systems of monitoring and surveillance, has resulted in the neglect of the liminal in the supervisory relationship, the spaces in-between, the unspoken, unscripted world. In this essay we are attempting to redress the balance between systems and process thinking; to reappraise the relationship between composition and performance in relation to research supervision in an increasingly professionalised environment; to restore the value of amateurism; and to explore the extent to which analogies with music and other performance arts (such as theatre) can inform a critique of contemporary approaches to research supervision. Analogies can only take us so far, of course. The purpose of the one developed in these pages is not to devalue a particular art form or to assert the primacy of jazz over classical music. Rather, it is an invitation to see the world differently, to cast things in a different light, to gesture towards different ways of being, thinking and learning, with particular reference to research supervision.

What scope, then, is there for what Alterhaug (2004, p. 105) describes as ‘constructive uncertainty and confusion’ in the supervisory relationship, and indeed in other areas of academic practice? How can we reassert the value of teaching and learning in community? This is particularly urgent in a professional context in which we are increasingly required to relate to one another in ‘a complex, overlapping set of competitions’ (Ball, 2015, p. 259). How can we advance an alternative ontology of teaching and learning in which the emphasis is on ‘a way of being that consists of being passionately in love with the subject matter’ rather than in ‘possession of a set of technical skills’ (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2017, p. 854)?

Developing the musical analogy further may help to shed light on some of the obstacles that lie in the path of a more affirmative view of research supervision. Alterhaug (2004, p. 103) points out that when ‘inflexibility is regarded as synonymous with absoluteness and perfection’, then ‘control and prediction in human interrelationships’ take precedence. This is evident in the forms of governance in relation to research supervision that have come to the fore in recent years. These are characterised by an imposed orientation towards over-determined structures that allow for minimum flexibility. In contrast, what may be required to enhance the experience of all those involved in the process of research supervision is greater scope for ‘shared orientation toward minimal structures that allow maximum flexibility’ (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 107). In short, what we need is decreased reliance on centralised control: more jazz and less orchestration, perhaps. Only then, perhaps, can we fall in love with the work again.

Improvisation as ‘unselfing’ in the context of research supervision

There is a precedent for exploring research supervision from the perspective of lived experience, and indeed for using jazz as a metaphor through which to explore this area of academic practice. In an article playfully entitled ‘Hello Central, Give me Doctor Jazz’ Deterala et al. (2018) present a vivid, lively and novel account of the process of doctoral supervision within an education studies department in the UK. They describe how they devised a method of improvising reciprocal reflexivity. This involved undertaking a series of ‘interviews, conversations and reflections that addressed the condition of the international

student in UK Higher Education' (Deterala et al., 2018, p. 248). This process involved espousing a way of working that echoed the musical pattern of call and response. Call and response refers to the practice of jazz musicians who demonstrate the acute state of readiness and responsiveness towards the other that is characteristic of improvisation in a musical context.

Alterhaug (2004) points out that many musicians reject the term improvisation because of its everyday associations with lack of preparation and consideration. In the popular imagination improvisation is associated with something that is *ad hoc*, frivolous, inconsequential and possibly substandard. In the context of jazz, however, the word takes on a rather different meaning:

Improvisation is an activity that requires thorough preparation of a set of skills that need to be internalised. This means that the performer is prepared to handle the unexpected, to handle an error as a new creative challenge, and, thus, to break with habitual patterns. (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 105)

In organisational contexts, for instance, industry, management or education, improvisation is generally associated with off-the-cuff, emergency solutions or 'fire-fighting' (e.g. 'the system's down, we'll just have to improvise'). Alterhaug (2004, p. 106) explains that in these contexts improvisation is viewed 'as a rupture in the activities of a canonised, official administration system ... a temporary expedient, something risky and dangerous, and, accordingly, a practice and activity that should be avoided.' Deterala et al. (2018, p. 249) justify their methodological approach with reference to 'its potential for democratic collaboration and its insistence on improvisation'. In our case, 'interactive reflexivity' and polyphonic 'noises off' were necessary precursors to writing this essay. In our case, call and response took the form of 'just playing' (possibly to the bemusement of those who attended the conference presentation on the basis of which this essay was developed). It also involved discussing the differences between the nature of academic work and the professional musicianship. According to Bailey (1980) 'just playing' is how jazz musicians refer to the process of improvisation. In short, 'just playing' is simply what goes on between people in a particular context, on stage, in the studio or, as we suggest here, in the context of research supervision. 'Just playing' captures the 'dialectic between having the courage to let go of control and follow an as-yet-undetermined experience, and a creative meeting of narratives in which both parts become new' (Olsson, 2018, 174). The expression 'just playing' captures those aspects of education that so often elude us in conventional accounts, those flickering moments of receptiveness, humility, attentiveness, alertness, relaxation, excitement, elation, spontaneity, immediacy, doubt and uncertainty. The expression 'just playing' helps to direct our 'thinking about education towards those aspects that become invisible in fixed models of teaching and learning' (Olsson, 2018, p. 167). We hope that the faint echo of these quiet riffs will be discernible in these pages as 'noises off'. They suggest that 'in a close interplay between seeing and attending, responding and acting, value structures are created, upheld, ruined and reassembled' (Olsson, 2018, p. 170).

As the reader will be aware by now, this essay is derived from our embodied experience as dialogic and reflexive subjects in particular institutional contexts. Improvisation is thus part and parcel of our method of inquiry, as is our commitment to a community of practice which privileges 'just playing' in a climate where the emphasis is on the attainment of 'project milestones'. The two

institutions in which we work and study have a number of features in common with other higher education institutions in the UK and further afield. These are workplaces where ‘competition, performance and productivity’ are increasingly prioritized (Halse, 2011, p. 563). We have drawn upon our experience as persons in relation (an *ensemble*, perhaps) in order to consider some of the banal and mundane practices that form part of the armoury of the ‘performance individualism’ that characterizes contemporary higher education (Ball, 2015, p. 258). We have explored the implications of ‘performance individualism’ for theorising in relation to research supervision, without offering any concrete suggestions as to what a desirable cooperation between supervisor and student might look like. This is entirely deliberate. We saw from the examples above how some theorising in relation to research supervision bears traces of the very performance individualism that is distorting the sector (e.g. Deuchar, 2008; Elliot et al, 2016a; 2016b). Moreover, it exemplifies the ‘systems thinking’ that we reject. The research literature has tended to focus either on matters relating to research supervision rather than regarding the inter-relationship between supervisor and supervisee as a curious entanglement in a world of things. This, we suggest, is something that needs to be worked out as one goes along, in the manner of an essay. Specific examples of practices associated with performance individualism in respect of research supervision include institutional requirements to document and record students’ progress and their compliance with university policies (e.g. in relation to areas as diverse as research ethics and ‘employability skills’); for prospective supervisors to undertake formal training in research supervision; and for research students to engage in formal processes of ‘professional development planning’ (PDP) that can be subjected to external scrutiny and surveillance. We suggest that the net effect of an over-emphasis on these systemic developments is to promote a static, mechanistic worldview and to close down spaces for what is unforeseen, accidental, unexpected or surprising – in short, for improvisation, for jazz.

The composer, arranger and trumpeter Thad Jones explains how when musicians are ‘just playing’, ‘the aesthetics of presence holds unrestrictedly. You give yourself up, surrender without ulterior motives; *egoism and spirit of competition yield for generosity, presence and interdependence*’ (Alterhaug, 2004, p. 106) (emphasis added), a variation on the theme of ‘unselfing’. With reference once again to Rovelli (2018, pp. 16-17), we suggest that it is unreasonable to expect research students to advance like a platoon at a pace dictated by a single commander. Rather, they and their supervisors are caught up in the whirligig of time, interweaving dances made of different rhythms, dancing to a tune that they have made their own. Having offered the reader programme notes relating to a series of variations on a theme, we now briefly turn our attention to exploring the backdrop of the contemporary university. This will enable us to prepare for the final act, where we put education centre stage.

Research supervision in a culture of performativity

As the notion of performativity plays a key role in the development of the argument advanced in this essay, there is some merit in briefly exploring the meaning of the term. To attempt to do more than that would be to run the risk of discursively reproducing the very conditions of labour that we set out to challenge here.

Stephen Ball describes performativity as one of ‘three interrelated *policy technologies* that are profoundly implicated in the ‘education reform “package”’ that has permeated education systems at national and local level across the globe (emphasis in the original). The other two policy technologies are the market and managerialism respectively (Ball, 2003, p. 215). (See also Collini, 2012, 2017 for an astute analysis of the impact of marketization and accountability on the university sector, with particular reference to the situation in the UK). Needless to say, these ‘policy technologies’ have had a significant impact upon the nature of research supervision. For our current purposes it will suffice to note that research supervision has become big business, as ‘the number of research degrees awarded is a strong factor in assessing the quality of an institution’s research climate’ in an increasingly competitive environment (Deuchar, 2008, p. 489).

Ball (2003, p. 216) defines performativity in the context of the neo-liberal university as follows:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’, or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement.

Google Analytics shows that in 2018 the search term ‘neoliberal university’ yielded 9, 670,000 results. The volume of outputs suggests that the term has some utility in contemporary debates on the university, and that it is not uncontested. As Enright et al. (2016, p. 1) suggest, ‘the concept of a neoliberal university is useful shorthand for the idea of a university as a market-driven system [that] employs modes of governance based on a corporate model.’ In an intensely personal essay that draws upon his experience as an academic, Ball (2015, p. 258) makes a useful distinction between ‘the big-neo-liberalism, “out there” in the economy’ and the ‘little-neo-liberalism, “in here” in our daily lives and in our heads’. He outlines how the former operates within what we now call the ‘knowledge economy and informational capitalism’ (Ball, 2015, p. 259). The latter, ‘little neo-liberalism’ ‘is realised in a set of local practices that ‘articulates the mundane rhythms of our email traffic, our form-filling ... and re-modulates the ways in which we relate to one another as neo-liberal subjects, *individual, responsible, striving, competitive, enterprising*’ (Ball, 2015, p. 258: see also Ball, 2003) (emphasis added).

It is the strange and alien landscape of contemporary higher education, which is distorted by ‘the big-neo-liberalism, “out there” in the economy’, that provides the conceptual backdrop to this contribution. However, our focus here is on countering the effects of the ‘little neo-liberalism’ that pervades our daily lives in the academy. We are mainly concerned with care for each other, within the context of particular personal and professional (inter-) relationships, rather than with care about performance. We take the view that the latter flows from the former. We also concur with the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (1997, p. 308) who observed over 20 years ago that ‘when a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure’.

In the research literature on research supervision, there is increasing awareness of the extent to which the ‘little neo-liberalism’ abridges the complexity of human

relationships and limits our capacity to view others in their full humanity. As Halse (2011, p. 565) has pointed out, one of the consequences of the intensification of academic labour is that supervisors have redefined 'the practice of doctoral supervision from an intense personal relationship to a form of professional work'. Drawing on interview data gathered in an Australian university, Halse (2011, p. 568) describes how the 'regimes for performance and accountability' in one Australian university 'framed and fashioned supervisors' practices'. Yet supervisors also described practices that developed under the institutional radar and that were the product of a dialogic relationship. As Halse (2011, p. 566) explains:

Supervisors also described learning to 'tune in' to the intellectual and emotional needs of students: offering freedom when students were confident and secure; providing guidance when students were intellectually uncertain; giving sympathy and affirmation when students were physically exhausted or emotionally fragile.

Halse (2011, p. 568) concludes that 'it was through/in practice that doctoral supervisors learned new ways of organising their work, shaping their relationships with students'; and that research supervision is a continuous process of becoming rather than the development of a pre-determined skill set. However, what is troubling in this account is the exclusive focus on the 'subjectivities and identities' of supervisors rather than on relationships of interdependency.

Somewhere towards the end: putting education centre stage

The implicit appeal to theatre in our opening paragraph is entirely deliberate. The dialogic exchange at an educational research conference that provided the starting point for this essay speaks to the nature of our inquiry. In an article on the rise of political theatre in the UK published in *The Guardian* newspaper, Charlotte Higgins, chief culture writer observed that

Theatre involves bodies on stage performing mimetic actions in front of its audience, who are also there, in person. Theatre is the particular artform that shows us people doing things and asks us to reflect on these actions: the word for 'doing' in Greek is 'drama'.¹

These observations on the specific qualities of theatre resonate with a particular dimension of the educational experience, that is to say the 'broader aspects of learning that take place in and through social relations' (Thoutenhoofd and Pirrie, 2015, p. 73). The social dimension of educational experience is cast into the shadows in an era in which the emphasis is increasingly on the cognitive and affective functioning of the individual neo-liberal subject: i.e. on the capacities of supervisors and research students writ large and considered in isolation from each other. Learning, teaching and research are widely regarded as expressions of individual agency that can be subjected to monitoring and control, surveillance and measurement (Pirrie and Thoutenhoofd, 2013; Thoutenhoofd and Pirrie, 2015). In this essay we have tried to reinstate a vision of learning as social performance that is enfolded in particular practices by virtue of the space it inhabits (the classroom or lecture theatre, for example) or in a particular relationship (e.g. the one between a research student and his supervisor, or between colleagues who met at a rather special gathering of academics that privileges philosophy as lived experience).² The emphasis on the social is in marked contrast to the focus on the self that characterises 'educational' activities that generally take place in private, like reading a book, engaging with the virtual

learning environment, watching a video on YouTube, and a host of other ‘student-centred’ activities. Simone Roberts (2010, p. 118) describes the process of ‘unselfing’ as follows: ‘we don’t get to step away from relations to other people in order to get over ourselves; we get over ourselves in relation to other people.’ In contrast, the culture in contemporary higher education increasingly seems to privilege those who seek to *get one over on* other people, i.e. to promote their own interests at the expense of those of others.

We seek to reinstate a vision of research supervision as a particular form of human encounter, a dialogic relationship that unfolds in and over time. Education as a morally transformative process involves the exercise of attention. It is also quintessentially social activity, a way of leading life with others. Theatre, that ‘place for looking’ (*theatron*) and doing (*drama*) and music as the exercises of attunement seem particularly suited as vehicles through which to consider attention and sociability in the field of education. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2018, p. ix) has pointed out, education is about ‘attending to things, rather than acquiring the knowledge that absolves us of the need to do so; about exposure rather than immunisation’. We have attempted to expose the preconditions of our own improvisatory practice rather than to present a programme for immunisation. Like theatre, education as a form of practice involves performing live and gathering in one place in order to go through something together in an activated, listening mode. There is something inherently risky about such endeavours, and something that resists formulation as a programme for action. Moreover, it is precisely these qualities of risk, vulnerability and uncertainty that make for genuine and meaningful encounters between people. Like theatre, education is about going through something together in an active, listening mode and talking it over with your friends afterwards. This dimension is not susceptible to the technologies of measurement and is thus all too easily disregarded. Like theatre, higher education as personal, intellectual and moral transformation is a place of echoes, shadows and noises off. It is a place where past, present and future collide and resonate. Theatre is a place where time slips from the hands of mathematicians back into the hands of angels. Perhaps we should have similar aspirations for higher education.

Coda

In this essay we have been concerned with the extent to which current approaches to the issue of research supervision are inflected by ‘the big-neo-liberalism, “out there” in the economy’. We suggest that they exhibit an extrinsic structuralism that reifies macro-phenomena (such as research supervision or ‘student satisfaction’) as abstract forces that determine action and are associated with a particular set of systemic requirements relating to monitoring, surveillance and the logic of competition. We have attempted to demonstrate that centralised processes such as these systematically undervalue the uncertain and fluctuating dynamics of interaction between individual research supervisors and students. Even more importantly, they do not take due account of the manner in which our humanity and complexity are inscribed within such exchanges. The micro-situational dynamics of social interaction have a constitutive role in forging and maintaining relationships between research students and their supervisors. These polyphonic variations are hard to capture and are susceptible neither to measurement nor to programmatic formulation. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that they have hitherto escaped attention as they do not feature among the ‘new and excruciating

visibilities within which we, as academics, relate to one another, and in relation to which we must seek our place and our worth and fulfil our needs and desires' (Ball, 2015, p. 259).

As Olsson (2018, p. 168) points out, '*unselfing* is dependent on humility, love, attention and imagination, qualities which are cultivated in the very process of experiencing them' (emphasis in the original). In order to reinstate higher education as a theatre of personal, intellectual and moral transformation, we need more *drama* (action) and fewer unconvincing narratives of amelioration. We need to maximise opportunities to gather together with friends in the penumbra of darkness (literal or metaphorical) and go through something together in active, responsive mode. This essay has been an invitation to watch us doing things, to reflect on these activities and, in due course, to produce more 'noises off' in call and response mode.

References

- Alterhaug, B. (2004) Improvisation on a Triple Theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication, *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, 30. pp. 97-118.
- Ball, S. (2003) The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18. 2, pp. 215-228.
- Ball, S. (2015) Living in the Neo-liberal University, *European Journal of Education*, 50. 3, pp. 258-261.
- Berliner, P. (1994) *Thinking in Jazz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Collini, S. (2017) *Speaking of Universities* (London: Verso).
- Conroy, J.C. and Smith, R. (2017) The Ethics of Research Excellence, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 51. 4, pp. 693-708.
- Deuchar, R. (2008) Facilitator, Director or Critical Friend: Contradiction and Congruence in Doctoral Supervision Styles, *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13. 4, pp. 489-500.
- Deterala, S., Owen, A., Su, F., Bamber, P. and Stronach, I. (2018) "Hello Central, Give Me Doctor Jazz": Auto/Ethnographic Improvisation as Educational Event in Doctoral Supervision, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24. 4, pp. 248-259.
- Elliot, D., Baumfield, V. Reid, K. and Makara, K.A. (2016a) Hidden Treasure: Successful International Doctoral Students who Found and Harnessed the Hidden Curriculum, *Oxford Review of Education*, 42 .6, pp. 733-748.
- Elliot, D., Reid, K. and Baumfield, V. (2016b) Beyond the Amusement, Puzzlement and Challenges: an Enquiry into International Students' Academic Acculturation, *Studies in Higher Education*, 41.12, pp. 2198-2217.
- Enright, E., Alfrey, L. and Rynne, S.B. (2017) Being and Becoming an Academic in the Neoliberal University: a Necessary Conversation, *Sport, Education and Society*, 22. 1, pp. 1-4.
- Halse, C. (2011) Becoming a Supervisor: the Impact of Doctoral Supervision on Supervisors' Learning, *Studies in Higher Education*, 36. 5, pp. 557-570.
- Halse, C. and Malfroy, J. (2010) Rethorising Doctoral Advising as 'Professional Work', *Studies in Higher Education*, 36. 1, pp. 79-92.

- Ingold, T. (2018) *Anthropology and/as Education* (London: Routledge).
- Maritz, J. and Prinsloo, P. (2015) A Bourdieusian Perspective on Becoming and Being a Postgraduate Supervisor: the Role of Capital, *Higher Education Research and Development*, 34. 5, pp. 972-985.
- Murdoch, I. (1997) [1962] The Idea of Perfection, in Murdoch, I. *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Penguin) pp. 299-236.
- Murdoch, I. (2003) [1992] *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage).
- Olsson, A-L. (2018) A Moment of Letting Go: Irish Murdoch and the Morally Transformative Process of *Unselfing*, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52.1, pp. 163-177.
- Phillips, A. (2013) Coda: up to a point, in *One Way and Another. New and Selected Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton)
- Pirrie, A. and Thoutenhoofd, E.D. (2013) Learning to Learn in the European Reference Framework for Lifelong Learning, *Oxford Review of Education*, 39. 5, pp. 609-626.
- Roberts, S. M.F. (2010) Messy is Flourishing is Sublime, in Roberts, S.M.F. and Scott-Baumann, A. (eds.) *Iris Murdoch and the Moral Imagination* (Jefferson, North Carolina, McFarland and Co.).
- Rovelli, C. (2018) *The Order of Time* (London, Penguin).
- Strathern, M. (1997) 'Improving ratings': Audit in the British University System, *European Review*, 5. 3, pp. 305-321.
- Thoutenhoofd, E.D. and Pirrie, A. (2015) From Self-regulation to Learning to Learn: Observations on the Construction of Self and Learning, *British Educational Research Journal*, 41. 1, pp. 72-84.
- Todd, S. (2015) Experiencing Change, Encountering the Unknown: an Education in 'Negative Capability' in Light of Buddhism and Levinas, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49. 2, pp. 240-259.
- Vlieghe, J. and Zamojski, P. (2017) The Event, the Messianic and the Affirmation of Life. A Post-critical Perspective on Education with Agamben and Badiou, *Policy Futures in Education*, 15. 7-8, pp. 849-860.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/mar/06/political-theatre-nations-debating-chamber>. It is important to note that theatre involves diegetic as well as mimetic actions. The former is in keeping with the line of argument about the shift in emphasis from orchestration towards improvisation. Do we need to move the emphasis away from narrators in order to allow more rounded characters to flourish?

² The annual conference on *Philosophy of Education as Lived Experience: navigating through dichotomies of thought and action* was inaugurated by Marianna Papastephanou on the island of Tilos, Greece in 2011. This unique symposium offers 20-25 invited participants the opportunity to engage in extended dialogue in a spectacular setting on issues broadly related to the purposes, practices and policies of education.