A COMPOSING ENSEMBLE: CREATING COLLABORATIVELY WITH HIGH SCHOOL INSTRUMENTALISTS

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Date 20 May, 2020

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in Teachers College, Columbia University

2020
ABSTRACT

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This study was about composing collaboratively. General music classrooms are often creative, fun and spontaneous spaces in which improvisation and composition exist in different degrees. Time is a limitation in the general music classroom and rarely do students have the time to re-work their compositions. On the other hand, the large ensemble provides the students with time to evolve and refine their work. In the large ensemble however, the creative choices are usually out of the students’ hands. This study aimed to understand the experience of students and a teacher composing music together.

The specific focus was to understand the creative process: (preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification) as it may exist in a large ensemble format where young composers write for and with their peers. The study took place in a New York City after school program in the South Bronx called UpBeat NYC. UpBeat is a not-for-profit, free of charge music program for the community. The participants were high school instrumentalists who participate regularly in large ensembles such as
Orchestra and Jazz Band. The ensemble met once a week for the duration of an academic year.

Data collection included interviews, brainstorming sessions, field notes, and the teacher’s journal. Through a deeply reflective and reconstructive narrative, the author’s engagement with the data uncovered themes relating to culture, community, representation and colonialism. Through the author’s vulnerabilities, mistakes and process, the study not only offers a window to look at possible strategies for a composing ensemble, but it also offers a reflection about research and ethnographic positionality.
DEDICATION

For my wife Coquito, my mom Zeida, my dad Wilfredo, my sister Carla, my brother Joseb and my nephew Sergio.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the utmost sacrifice, perseverance and commitment of my parents. Throughout the years, their love and support has made all the difference in my life, the life of my siblings and now, in the life of my beloved nephew Sergio. Thank you for being outstanding against all odds. Gracias mami por amanecerte conmigo haciendo proyectos de la escuela. Gracias papi por sentarte a ayudarme a resolver problemas de matemática. Gracias por que siempre me estuvo claro que el camino que recorría era importante para ustedes. Thank you for making me feel loved and important.

To my family in New York City, Titi Cuchi, Tio Manuel, Titi Anita, Titi Mima and Tio Moncho, thank you. You opened up your homes and cared for me. Without you none of this would’ve been possible. Tio Moncho and Tio Manuel, I am grateful to life to have been able to spend some time close to you. May you both rest in power.

To my dissertation committee, thank you! Thank you, Professor Richard Jochum, for being a part of such an important moment in my life. Thank you, Dr. Nancy Streim, for giving me the honor of accepting to be a part of my committee. Thank you for believing in me and for always supporting my vision during the time I had the privilege to teach the incredible students at TCCS. Thank you for always having your door open and for being accessible. Finally, thank you for the invitation to write and publish alongside you about the work that was being done at TCCS. It was a true honor.
Professor Lori Custodero, during my years at TC I have felt your support at every step of the way. Through you I was able to meet and work with the students of TCCS and it changed my life. Thank you for believing in me and for your guidance in the past years. In your class I reconnected with the musical aspects of my childhood and it reminded me why we do what we do. Thank you.

Professor Randall Allsup, my sponsor, thank you! I am very grateful to have worked with you during these past years. Thank you for believing in me and for your support during this process. Thank you for pushing me intellectually and for supporting my voice. My time at TC transformed me, and you were a fundamental part of it. I will cherish your lessons forever. Thank you for being my friend.

In a world riddled with violence, discrimination and underestimation towards women, I want to acknowledge (in addition to the ones I already have), women that have had a profound and inspiring impact in my life. I consider these women role models and I will forever be grateful to have crossed paths with them.

Malika, there will never be enough words to express my gratitude to you. Thank you for what you do for all of us at the music department. Your diligence and wisdom are unparalleled. You were always there for me when I needed anything. Your kind words of advice and encouragement gave me strength and determination at difficult times. Thank you for treating me like family. I will never forget it.

Katy, ever since we met, you have always been, and will always be one of my best friends. It was an honor and a pleasure to work and study alongside you and to witness your brilliance. Thank you for your generosity and your friendship. I will never cease to be inspired by you and all that you do. Thank you, my friend.
Tammy, you were one of the first people to ever talk to me at TC. The first thing you did was to offer me a job. You have no idea how much that meant and still means to me. With you I learned things that are not written in books. No mountain is high enough for you. Today, I am beyond proud to call you my friend.

Audrey, I have always thought that great leaders are what they are, not because they have authority, but because they inspire those who they lead. I don’t know of a better way to describe you. For a few years I had the pleasure to work under your leadership and during this time I flourished as a professional. Your work ethic is impeccable and admirable. Thank you for guiding and supporting me.

Professor Emma Rodríguez Suárez, my first experience doing research was under your guidance and mentorship. You were the first accomplice I had in this dream of pursuing a doctorate. You recommended Teachers College to me; you had the vision. This achievement is yours as well. Tus lecciones me acompañaron en cada paso del camino. Gracias Emma.

Marla, you are not only one of my dearest friends, you are my family. Throughout the years you have given me your unconditional support. Thank you for always believing in me and for helping me out in my most difficult times. I am forever in your debt! You are an important part of this achievement.

I also want to acknowledge some of my fellow students: Ruth Aguirre, Ling López, Deejay Robinson, Pablo Rodríguez, and Martin Urbach for their unwavering commitment to social justice. Thank you for being a source of inspiration with your scholarship and activism.
To my peers and friends in the doctoral cohort, thank you! I was incredibly lucky to have the chance to interact with such privileged minds. I continue to be inspired by your work and insight. Thank you for your feedback and support. I will be forever grateful.

George, my dear friend and brother. I am grateful for the honor to take on this journey with you. From 3:00 am post-bar-walks in China, to silently sitting across from each other in the library to work on our dissertation, we have definitely been through a lot together. I am thrilled to cross the finish line alongside you.

Lastly but not least, I want to acknowledge my wife Coquito. You are my primary source of inspiration. Thank you for your incredible support during this time. This has been a family effort, and without you, it wouldn’t have been possible. Thank you for all you do. I love you!

Y. C. C. L.
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PRELUDE

The Harder They Come the Harder They Fall

I remember walking across the parking lot at the Puerto Rico Music Conservatory back in 2006. It was my first year studying music composition and that day I was going to have an orchestral work played for me as a part of an orchestration course in which I was enrolled. I had my score and my parts meticulously prepared and revised, and I was ready to have a great experience as a composer. I wasn’t sure about the outcome. I trusted my music, but I didn’t trust the musicians.

As a composer, I worked in isolation and to do so made me feel sufficient and successful. To be able to compose music, merging technique and artistic inspiration, was a highly regarded gift within my music world. Try to picture my excitement, also understand my arrogance, my entitlement to authority. It was my music after all. Even when half of the orchestra members were my close friends and a great source of inspiration, even when I approached them with humility, I was still a figure of power. I had worked on this piece by myself; therefore, this orchestra reading was my experience and the musicians were the means to an end.

The musicians were ready to play as the conductor hit his baton on the music stand in front of him, but I’m already upset. There’s a few musicians who seem uninterested and unmotivated. Immediately I feel powerless. The success of my music is at the mercy of an indifferent orchestra and I am at the risk of being misrepresented.
The music finally starts. To my surprise, the musicians play flawlessly! I finally hear my theme and its development. The bassoon solo I wrote was perfectly executed. I felt grateful, uplifted, validated, complete. The piece is in its most climatic moment and about to end and suddenly...a clash, a horrible sound, a mistake! The conductor stops the orchestra. It was the trombone section. The same musicians that seemed uninterested before the performance.

The conductor looks at the score and asks me to come join him at the stage. I humbly approach the podium but I was confident that I would be helping the conductor clarify and provide some guidance to the musicians. He points out to the score and asks me, “is this the note you want here?” I immediately look at my score and I realize this had not been a mistake by the trombone section, it was my mistake! The voicing I chose for the brass didn’t work at all. Even when the theory behind the notes was correct, it failed in the execution. I was asked to revise my orchestration and the orchestra moved on to another piece.

I sat through the rest of the rehearsal wondering why this had happened to me. I had been so careful. My theory was good, I followed the guidelines in the books, I practiced variation, theme development, and harmony daily. I reversed engineered the works of the great maestros, I analyzed them and drew inspiration and craftsmanship from their masterpieces. I was conflicted and confused.

After the rehearsal the trombone section leader approached me. He had the parts for my piece in his hand and asked me if I had a minute. We sat down and looked over my music. He shared with me some tricks he learned from years of sitting in the trombone section. He worked through the problem with me, with kindness, enthusiasm,
and a surprising interest. This was not the same person I saw before the performance; he was now a part of my music and my process. And my process became our process, and my music became our music.

The second day of rehearsal was a success. I had gotten a lesson far more profound than learning how to write for brass. It was clear from there on that I needed to work with others every time I would write music. I needed the input of performers, and a collaborative space to create without the fear of error. I had valuable knowledge and experiences, but my product needed a better process.

The hierarchical system of composing had locked me into isolation and therefore I was arrogant. Unknowingly I was following famed American composer Milton Babbitt’s idea that the composer should isolate himself from the social and public aspects of music composition to protect their art from the inadequacies of the audience. Babbitt believes that by doing so, “the composer would be free to pursue a private life of professional achievement, as opposed to a public life of unprofessional compromise and exhibitionism” (Babbitt, 1958, p. 158). Upon personal reflection I understood that my arrogance was hiding the fact that I was fragile and afraid to make mistakes.

The lack of choice in orchestra had the trombonist unmotivated and uninterested. But when we sat down together we brought our best selves to this new space. My theory and my technique, merging with his experience and execution, created a space for identity sharing and creative problem solving which satisfied our musical expectations in ways that our traditional practices couldn’t. Could an analogous space exist in the public school? Can we combine singular inspiration with group support? Creativity with the
Chapter I
INTRODUCTION

This study is about composing collaboratively. It aims to understand the experience of students and a teacher composing music together. The specific focus was to understand the creative process: (preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification) as it may exist in a large ensemble format where young composers write for and with their peers. The setting took place in an after school program in New York City. And I am the teacher.

Overview

I characterize United States of America’s music education as inhabiting two domains. First, in the general music classroom students are exposed to the nature of music as they discover and learn about its building blocks and rudimentary elements. Singing, solfege, drumming, movement and other musical elements are presented through the teacher’s facilitation. Hopefully, the result is an environment in which students can be free to engage with music as they learn the concepts related to it. In this rendering, the general music classroom is a place of creativity, which is consistent with the trends of music education that arose from movements like the Tanglewood Symposium (1967) and the Manhattan Music Curriculum Project (1970).

From the Tanglewood Symposium the following is said about creativity and schools:
Creativity is a valued ingredient of life […]. Hence, we will do all we can to promote the development of every child’s creative activities. Creativity leads to peak experiences which highlight life. For these reasons the school and community [should] provide an environment which induces creative behavior. (Choate, 1968, p. 129)

Throughout my career I have seen many general music teachers make use of these values. In my own lesson planning I often include time to improvise and compose. Even though the teachers I have worked with, including myself in my own lessons, seldom have the time to do long-term composition projects, I recognize the teachers’ interest to have students share their creative efforts through improvising, composing and performing by themselves or in groups.

The Archived 1994 Music Standards by NAfME include in point no. 3 “Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments” and in point no. 4, “Composing and arranging music within specified guidelines.” Points no. 1 and no. 2 respectively address singing and performing on instruments and in both instances specify the need for students to engage in these activities “alone and with others.” This distinction is not made when addressing creativity standards like improvisation and composition. The 2014 Music Standards by NAfME are comprehensive in relation to the 1994 standards. There are a set of standards for general music classes and another set for composition/theory, among others. Both, the general music set and the composition/theory set include and extensive explanations for the various levels of “Creating.” In both sets “Creating” is categorized as follows: imagine, plan and make, evaluate and refine, and share. Peer work is not mentioned in the standards until the “evaluate and refine” stage in which students are encouraged to critique and provide feedback to one another. And later in the “share” stage, students are also encouraged to
present “alone or with others.” The early stages of “imagine” and “plan and make” seem to be directed at the individual.

The second domain of USA’s music education is the large ensemble. Around fifth grade the general music classes usually end and instrumentalists who live in a district with enough funds can choose from different versions of the large ensemble: choir, concert band and orchestra. Rehearsals bring forth the opportunity to learn more from the instrument and improve technique. Battisti (1989) believes that the concert band’s objective is “to assist every student in the development of his or her potential to create, understand, and appreciate the art of music” (p. 25). He also believes that an instrumental program should offer broad and balanced music activities with the concert band or the wind ensemble at the center of its curriculum.

Jazz bands, pit bands, marching bands and pep bands are also a part of students’ musical experiences so that “students can be exposed to a rich diet of music from the past and present and can be offered an opportunity to learn about music—its history, its literature, and its traditions—and to develop good performance skills” (Battisti, 1989, p. 25). In a 2003 study, ensemble participation yielded musical, academic, psychological and social benefits. The social climate emerged as a pervasive element in the study as students noted the importance of relationships for their well-being and growth (Adderly, Kennedy, & Bertz, 2003).

In highlighting the distinctions between general music and large ensemble education, it’s difficult to imagine that either of these domains provide a “perfect” equilibrium of process and product, of trial and error. Opportunities to be creative exist in the general music classroom but when students compose, they may not have time to
come back to their compositions. Students may not able to verify, and re-work their music into a finished product which means they are often unable to replicate, or recall it. Some research suggests that in those situations where students are unable to do so, they are merely improvising—not composing (Auh, 1997; Kratus, 1985). In the large ensemble, time is employed in the crafting of the selected repertoire (concert-as-curriculum) to be presented and performed as a finished product in a concert for the school community, a school festival or music competition. Farnsley et al. (1987) expressed the hope that “the focus should be on the student’s development, not on winning trophies or vanquishing school rivals” (p. 43). The large ensemble possesses the time and collaboration and the general music classroom may not be as rich as it could be, however, some critics maintain that the model for large ensembles in North America may be mostly teacher-centered, which means that the choices are generally in the hands of the teacher (Allsup & Benedict, 2008; Jachens, 1985; Kratus, 2007; Williams, 2007). This large group teaching model seems to contribute to their musicianship development in various ways, however it doesn’t seem to encourage students to “create and recreate—fuse and refuse—a life of complex and self-fulfilling musical engagement” (Allsup, 2012, p. 186).

In this study I ask: Could a place that combines elements of these two worlds exist? A place in which students have the chance to be creative without time constraints and in which they can work collaboratively? What if a space existed in which students and teachers worked to create music together? This could be a space in which the process-like atmosphere of the general music classroom meets the high level type of product associated with the large ensemble. Students could focus on finding their own
musical values through creating repertoire which they will perform later after careful elaboration, refinement, revision, and practice. The current study focuses on this possibility. What does a composing ensemble look like? What roles do participants inhabit?

**Background**

Certain historical documents are more than snapshots of their time. The Tanglewood Declaration continues to speak for our professional aspirations perhaps because its principles have yet to be realized. During the conference, which lasted from July 23 to August 2 of 1967, the Tanglewood Symposium emphasized the importance of creativity in music education. Tanglewood released a series of recommendations concerning creativity in its report.

The point of view that children are born with the capacity for creative response and that such can be elicited emphasizes anew the responsibility of the school in establishing a classroom environment and planning instructional experiences which are consecutive, continuous and conducive to the many facets of creative expression. (Choate, 1968, p. 129)

The document also presented a series of qualities a teacher must possess to be fit for creative teaching. Some of these are:

- A flexibility in adapting to the needs of children at all times
- An interest in helping children discover the social relevance of music
- The capacity to arouse a curiosity about music that won’t let go until it is satisfied. (p. 129)

More than 50 years later, we seem to still be facing many of the problems that led to the Tanglewood Symposium. Steve Giddings (2013), a Canadian K-6 music teacher, shares about his musical experience in school:
Creativity is something that music is inherently supposed to possess, but many music programs do not incorporate creativity into their musical learning. Students constantly recreate pieces of music and the teacher ends up being the creative one. I don’t remember being creative at all in my junior high and high school band when I was in school. The only time I was creative was either on the drums in the school jazz band or in rock bands outside of school. Sure, I did a few improvised solos in the university jazz band but the first time I considered myself a composer and a creative trombonist was with my original ska band of two and a half years, The Sidewalks. (Giddings, 2013, p. 44)

Drawing on his past experiences and his creative success with his original band, Giddings facilitates an environment in his classroom that provides the students with a safer place to explore, create, revise and perform. One of his student guitarists showed up to rehearsal one day with a chord progression that he taught to the other guitarists. The drummer figured out a beat and the singer started working lyrics right away. Within 20 minutes of “jamming” they had a workable version of a song with little guidance from him. In his reflection, Giddings attributes the student’s success to the facilitation of an environment of trial and error in which students felt safe improvising with their peers (p. 45).

Then there is the story of Lindy. Lindy was considered an “average” student by her band teacher, Mr. Hammond, as explained in an article for the *Music Educators Journal* (Scheib, 2006). Her band experience centered “on opportunities to be in competition with other students; skill development for achievement’s sake and to receive a satisfactory grade; and learning and following classroom rules and procedures” (p. 35). In the interviews “Lindy never mentions musical emotion, feelings, or aesthetic qualities in her responses” (p. 35) when asked about what she enjoys most about band. What motivates Lindy to be in band comes “from the extrinsic qualities of the traditional band program, such as competition and achievement, rather than from attributes specific to
music or fine arts, such as the qualities associated with performing or creating music” (p. 35).

New concerns with social relevance in music education remain an urgent call among current researchers. It is important that we “consider that we work with music because the social life, cultural life of our communities, is something we care deeply about” (Allsup & Shieh, 2012, p. 48). Many argue that there is a moral argument when it comes to social values, which can be said to be at the heart of teaching (Hansen, 2001). Allsup (2012), talks about moral education connected to “the most formative undertakings of life, [and] to those qualities that enhance personal growth and independent thinking while enriching our relationships with others” (p. 180). To engage in the teaching of music is therefore an act, a commitment and a testament to a deeply rooted inclination towards social justice (Allsup & Shieh, 2012, p. 48).

Kanellopoulos (2012) explores the issue of collaborative music-making through improvisation and composition. He suggests that a continuous re-contextualization of inherent meanings through collective music-making is part of a “larger process where pedagogy creates the context for constant interrogations of ‘assumptions and definitions’” (p. 169). This example makes possible the idea that collective music-making can be part of the process by which democracy is cultivated and maintained. He also makes the point that “musical autonomy would be that condition where improvising and composing function as processes of instituting musical practices, of creating forms of musical practices that envision non-suppressive forms of social organization” (p. 169).
However, it seems that the opposite usually happens in large ensembles in North America: “Instrumental music programs are traditionally very didactic” (Holsberg, 2009, p. 16). There is an emphasis in control and efficiency.

When the band director “micromanages” all facets of the performance to present a polished product, such a pedagogy is likely to realize the musical vision of one person in the room: the band director. (p. 16)

More than 50 years after Tanglewood expressed the importance of arousing deep musical curiosity in students, most of them stop playing their instruments after graduation (Williams, 2007). The recommendations made by the Tanglewood Symposium remain valid in our time since creativity is not always at the center of music education in North America.

**Theoretical Framework**

Creativity has been an important topic in North American education since the 1960’s. Many efforts have been made to explain its relevance and place in music education (Canfield, 1961; College Music Society, 2014; Custodero, 2002, 2005, 2012; Gray, 1960; Hickey & Webster, 2001; Kiehn, 2003, Major, 2016; Landis, 1968; MMCP, 1970; Tanglewood, 1968; Webster, 1990). In Tanglewood’s 1968 report humankind is deemed the architect of its civilization and creativity is considered a necessary characteristic for society and democracy to flourish.

Quality in life requires imagination. Traditional forms of life demand periodic refertilization; existing institutions require constant rejuvenation, and new social problems call for continual invention of appropriate social agencies. (Choate, 1968, p. 128)

The call resurfaces in the College Music Society’s Report where it is discussed that “one of the most startling shortcomings in all of arts education is that too many music students graduate with little to no experience or significant grounding in the essential creative
processes of improvisation and composition” (CMS Report, 2014, p. 58). In response to the various calls for creative education, researchers continue to expand the knowledge and understanding on creativity.

In research by Maude Hickey and Peter Webster (2011), creativity is experienced through four different perspectives: person, process, product and place. Hickey and Webster base their creative process explanation on Graham Wallas’ (1926) four stage model: preparation, incubation, illumination, verification.

In the preparation stage the person begins to think and gather materials for her project. In music, the creative thinker or thinkers begin by asking themselves questions such as “What do we want to compose? “What instruments should we use?” “What genre or style shall I incorporate into my composition?” (Hickey & Webster, 2001, p. 20) A study by Wiggins (1994) revealed how students when prompted with music composing tasks organized themselves firstly working together in their groups, retreating to independent developmental work later and then returning to the group with ideas and strategies for the project. The preparation stage is the initial assessment of what is needed to embark in the creative project.

In the incubation stage, the person usually steps away from the problem allowing “the brain to do its work” (Hickey & Webster, 2001, p. 20). This quote is consistent with Dewey’s concept of the balance of work and play. A process has begun, and in the preparation stage, the thinkers have adopted a work ethic that exists in process and advances towards a resolution or product. To balance the “working” part of the process comes the “play” part. Dewey (1910) writes:

To give the mind this free play is not to encourage toying with a subject, but is to be interested in the unfolding of the subject on its own account, apart from its
 subservience to a preconceived belief of habitual aim. Mental play is open-mindedness, faith in the power of thought to preserve its own integrity without external supports and arbitrary restrictions. Hence free mental play involves seriousness, the earnest following of the development of subject-matter. (pp. 218-219)

The illumination stage is the moment where a sudden realization facilitates advances and progress towards the aims or expectations of the project. It could be described as the “aha!” moment. This can happen suddenly while the person is working on the project or while away (Hickey & Webster, 2001, p. 20). Lastly, in the verification stage, ideas come together into a creative product. For a music composer, this can be the moment in which she listens to her music for the first time. The creator or creators have the chance to continue editing and refining their product and could reenter the process at any point in the four-stage model until they are satisfied with the process and the product (p. 20).

Yet, when I recall composing, I recognize that the process is not linear. Could it be possible for some of the stages to happen simultaneously? Is illumination guaranteed in every creative process? If there is no illumination, can we call a process creative? Is preparation always a conscious stage? How does it work with others?

Furthermore, Hickey and Webster’s cognitive understanding and explanation about creativity remains unknown when it comes to a group format. How does illumination occur in the group, or because of the group? Is it contagious? Does it work like a domino effect? Does verification mean rejection of some of the ideas presented? How do individuals deal with that rejection and revision? How do the stages fit into cooperative and collaborative methodologies? Are stages necessary?
Cooperative learning and collaborative learning have different implications according to Iborra, García, Margalef, and Pérez (2010). During their six-year exploration of group work they found themselves making a transition from using cooperative techniques to a more open and collaborative based methodology. They make the following distinction:

In collaborative learning the authorship and responsibility of the process is shared between the teacher and the students. In cooperative learning it is the teacher who directly leads all the process from outside, even though the teacher suggests what to do he [or she] does not take a direct part in the process. Collaborative learning maintains an idea of Education as a transformative potential for all the participants (teacher and students as a whole). Cooperative learning stress an idea of Education directed towards the transmission of information in order to promote learning. (p. 50)

About this, Wiersema (2002) says the following:

Collaboration is more than cooperation […] cooperation is a technique to finish a certain product together: the faster, the better, the less work for each, the better. Collaboration refers to the whole process of learning, to students teaching each other, students teaching the teacher (why not) and of course the teacher teaching the students too. (pp. 3-4)

Another aspect to consider is the cultural context in which these stages occur. In an individual, the creative stages are embedded in the individual’s cultural background. How does the collective creative process of a group with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds fit into this model? How do individuals characterize their experience?

This study aims to expand, explore and test Hickey and Webster’s creativity model by holistically looking at the process and the tested product space and how the product can reenter the creative process at any stage. I will also think deeply about culture and look for evidence of its importance. Through Iborra, García, Margalef, and Pérez’s concept that “collaborative learning maintains an idea of education as a
transformative potential for all the participants (teacher and students as a whole)” (p. 50),
the study aims to understand how do these stages intersect and intertwine and how the
culture and the context of the classroom inform the product.

Problem Statement

General music classrooms are often creative, fun and spontaneous spaces in which
improvisation and composition exist in different degrees. Time is a limitation in the
general music classroom and rarely do students have the time to re-work their
compositions. On the other hand, the large ensemble provides the students with time to
evolve and refine their work. In the large ensemble however, the creative choices are
usually out of the students’ hands. Works are presentational more than participatory
(Turino, 2008), meaning they are recreations more than collaborations or new creations.

Setting

This study took place in a New York City after school program in the South
Bronx called UpBeat NYC. UpBeat is a not-for-profit, free of charge music program for
the community. The participants were high school instrumentalists who participate
regularly in large ensembles such as Orchestra and Jazz Band. UpBeat students are
mostly Latinx and Black.

Research Interests

My study aims to answer and discuss the following research interests: What does
creativity look like in the culture of this classroom ensemble and how does the context
inform the product? How do individuals name, express and negotiate their musical
values, ideas and experiences with others? I am also interested in the multiple and varied ways that my participation affected the ensemble.

**Methodology Overview**

This is a qualitative study that uses a *teacher action research* paradigm. Lewin (1946) defined *action research* as “a way of conducting social science that linked the generation of theory to changing a social system through action” (quoted in Yorks, 2005, p. 376). From this perspective, action research is a way of generating knowledge and change in a particular system. The study aims to capture the openness of a collaborative work in progress in which students and teacher come together to create music in a particular cultural space.

Teacher action research, like action research is a non-linear form of inquiry in which practitioners seek understanding of their own practice. This paradigm allowed me to come into the classroom not only as a teacher or researcher, but as a fellow music maker and composer to the students with whom I will be composing music with. Through this collective action we will generate knowledge about creativity and ensemble work while we aspire to create and/or discover a new musical creative space.

As mentioned, the participants in this study were New York City high school instrumentalists with whom I joined with to compose and perform music collaboratively. The data was collected through brainstorming sessions, field notes, reflective journaling and interviews. I drew upon narrative research to share my story as it evolved. Squire, Andrews, and Tambouku (2013) suggest that through narrative research,

> We are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, […] bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change. By focusing on narrative, we are able to
investigate not just how stories are structured and the ways in which they work, but also who produces them and by what means; the mechanisms by which they are consumed; how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted and what, if any, effects they have. (p. 2)

Audio recordings of musical episodes were transcribed and also became part of the data. As the reader will see, and much to my surprise, my journal became a key source of both evidence and insight. My personal reflections were critical to the findings in this study. Through these personal reflections, the final chapters of the dissertation show in detail my personal struggles with research, identity, and my quest for an ethical way in which to interact with the students that joined me through the composing ensemble’s journey.
Chapter II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the following chapter I will be reviewing, discussing, and critiquing the literature related to my study. Due to the lack of literature on composition ensembles, I will be reviewing literature on related areas such as music composition in the classroom, large ensemble practices, and creativity and music education. The literature on creativity is very extensive and covers many areas and disciplines. I will focus my research on the creative concerns that the music education community has manifested in various forms since the 1960s, and will do so in an effort to create a fairly chronological account of creativity through composing in music education.

Creativity in the General Music Classroom

When the launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 was perceived by the American public as a terrifying confirmation of technological disadvantage, the Education Committee of the National Academy of Sciences met in Woods Hole, Massachusetts in a conference that defined the early years of educational reform. The result of this technological race led to a focus on national standards, incentives, and eventually intense forms of monitoring (Trohler, 2011, p. 60). The focus on science, math and technology led to an abandonment of arts and creativity in education. In the summer of 1967 musicians, sociologists, labor leaders, government representatives, scientists, educators, representatives of corporations, foundations, and communications, and others concerned with music and its facets assembled at Tanglewood. This
conference, now referred to as the “Tanglewood Symposium” included plenary sessions, panel representations and subject area discussions through which the participants explored value systems such as: the role of the arts in society; characteristics of the emerging age; the diversity and trends of contemporary music; impact and potential in the behavioral sciences; the nature and nurture of creativity; and the means for collaboration among institutions concerned with music (Choate, 1968, p. iii).

The conference was organized to face the challenges that arose from social, economic, and cultural development in the past decades. The Documentary Report of the Tanglewood Symposium adds the following:

The Symposium sought to re appraise and evaluate basic assumptions about music in the “educative” forces and institutions of our communities — the home, school, peer cultures, professional organizations, church, community groups, and communications media — to develop greater concern and awareness of the problems and potentials of music activities in our entire culture and to explore means of greater cooperation in becoming more effective as we seek new professional dimensions. (Choate, 1968, p. iii)

Among the recommendations the Tanglewood Symposium would release was a commentary on creativity, which illuminated the perception of creativity at the time and its importance for society and democracy:

The United States is a mobile, but not completely integrated society. Acceptance of difference and respect for the dignity of others are traits related to creative behavior. Flexibility and adaptability, openness to new ideas, and freedom of artistic expression, are necessary national characteristics that, at least in part, assure that democracy will not only survive, but flourish. (Choate, 1968, p. 128)

With this statement the Symposium states that creativity is an essential ingredient that adds vitality and meaning to society. Furthermore, creativity is needed for the continuous rejuvenation of existing institutions which face new social problems that constantly need an appropriate response from social agencies.
The symposium also justifies the need for creativity by making a distinction between humans and other species stating that “man [sic] is the only creative animal” (Choate, 1968, p. 129), making the democratic process possible. The Tanglewood Symposium affirms that individuals need a structure in which to grow but that this structure should be flexible enough so that it does not inhibit the development of creativity, which according to their commentary, it is a trait that exists in all humans (p. 129). Therefore, the school is responsible for “establishing a classroom environment and planning instructional experiences which are consecutive, continuous and conducive to the many facets of creative expression” (p. 129).

The importance of creativity and its importance for education has been pointed out before Tanglewood. Justin Gray (1960) affirms that creation or creativity has “elementary, advanced and supreme aspects — that it is an act that can be performed with greater or lesser competence and so is an educable factor in life” (p. 58). However, creativity is not only an artistic problem; it is a general human concern that greatly facilitates our way of communicating ideas if progress is to be made.

Then creativity becomes really the goal or desired end of all musical activity. We need to learn this language of sound so as to best express our individual creative needs. Creativity cannot be restricted to segmented portions of musical endeavor but must become a basic part of all musical experience — it is the reason for music’s existence. (Gray, 1960, p.58)

This shows an early concern with the way creativity existed in music education at the time. Gray calls for a music education that revolves around creativity at every level and at every musical activity that the students experience throughout their music education. However, Gray’s model does frame these efforts as a service that is done to the individual student. Moreover, there is little discussion that deals with culture.
A few years after Gray’s remarks, in the 1964-1965 School year, young composers started working at public schools as part of the Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education, a project sponsored by MENC that dated all the way back to 1959. It was funded by the Ford Foundation in an effort to increase the emphasis on the creative aspects of music in the public school system and it would focus on three major types of projects: (1) Fellowships to young composers to reside in selected school districts to compose music for school performing groups; (2) Seminars and workshops on contemporary music and creativity in music education; (3) Pilot projects at the elementary and secondary level in selected school systems to initiate methods of presenting contemporary music and to encourage development and realization of creative talent (Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education, 1963, p. 70).

This project aimed to bring composers and music educators together in workshops and seminars in an effort to develop courses which involved techniques on how to teach composition. But the outcomes sought were contemporary classical, or avant-garde, not popular music which is largely the style most youth today prefer. These seminars were intended to not only provide in-service education for teachers but also, they could lead to the implementation of courses at the college level for future music educators (Joint Committee of Contemporary Music Project in Music Education, 1963, p. 41).

In a similar spirit, in July of 1966, over 20 musicians gathered at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York, to brainstorm how music education could be improved at the primary and secondary levels in public schools. After the first meeting the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project emerged and with it, two principal intentions: “The first intention was to identify the general principles by which students could garner
a sense of the substance and methods of making music without prematurely steeping them in the narrowing pursuits of skill development” (Pogonowski, 2001, p. 25). This emerged in response to a music education system that at the time had mostly been focused on skills and performance and with little focus on how students may find personal meaning in their musical experiences through creative thinking and problem solving (p. 25). “The second intention was to provide a curriculum framework that remained stable, though always responsive to both the changing nature of music and to the society in which that music exist” (p. 26). Pogonowski affirms that the documents that emerged from the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, MMCP Synthesis and MMCP Interaction are not supposed to be taken as fixed methods but rather as fluid and progressive suggestions and guidelines that aim towards engaging students to make music. She also adds that “creating, performing, listening, analyzing, and evaluating are mutually supportive behaviors” (p. 26).

Tanglewood, the Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education, and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project have similar concerns. The 1960s and 1970s capture more of the contradictions of this time and the contemporary blind spots for music education and the place of creativity in it. There was a big interest in the future of music education and therefore an interest in teacher training and in making sure they had enough and useful guidelines to transform music education into the creative experience both of these two conferences believed it should be.

As seen before in this document, Gray places importance on creativity because he believes that it is the building block of communication, therefore human progress. For Tanglewood, creativity fuels flexibility, adaptability, openness to new ideas, and freedom
of artistic expression, which are fundamental to the survival and flourishing of democracy. The Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education was largely centered in creativity and aimed to re-vamp music education by bringing in composers and providing in-service teacher training to encourage creative development.

The Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project, as explained by Pogonowski (2001), was concerned with providing students the opportunity to find personal meaning in musical experiences through creative music making. As they create and perform their own music, they learn to listen to others’ music as well.

Creativity is not simply a discrete intellectual exercise but is infused with emotion, requiring intrinsic motivation on the part of the individual. In the MMCP, teachers and students participated in an environment of unconditional positive regard, where they were encouraged to construct their own solutions to problems in music and in so doing, express their own perspectives, feelings, and understandings to others. (p. 26)

These examples provide us with a good idea of the general atmosphere that surrounded music education in the United States at the time. A clear interest in creativity and its possible implications for music education was consistently being manifested by musicians, educators, psychologists, and others. The narrative about creativity and the recognition of its importance for music education nationwide kept many educators and others interested throughout the 1960s and 1970s and, as one would expect, the discussion continued to evolve. In turn, researchers started making more questions. In the next section I will discuss some of the more contemporary views and analysis about creativity.

**Understanding and Implementing Composition**

Peter Webster (1987) was interested in explaining how the creative process in music occurs. In his work he makes references to the work of psychologists such as J.P.
Guilford, William James, B.F. Skinner, Sigmund Freud, and Jean Piaget, to mention a few. At the time of Webster’s work, studies conducted by music researchers had mostly been focused on methodologies to implement creativity in the classroom; however, the interest in cognitive processes for creativity was rapidly growing (pp. 158-159).

Webster’s conceptual model of creating thinking was supported by “measurement techniques that have their basis in the Guilford model, Vaughan (1971), Gorder (1976), and Webster (1977)” (Webster, 1987, p. 161), who investigated creative thinking in music with children between the ages of 10 and 18. Some of Webster’s (1987) important findings that support his creative thinking model are the following:

1. Musical divergent production skills are measurable and may play an important role in the creative thinking process.
2. Musical divergent production skills are not significantly related to traditional measures of musical aptitude and seem to play an independent role in the definition of musical intelligence.
3. Musical achievement does affect the performance on musical divergent production skills.
4. Neither cognitive intelligence, academic achievement, nor gender seem significantly related to musical divergent production skills. (p. 161)

Webster (1987) argues that divergent thinking involves the generation of many possible solutions to a given problem, something like “a kind of personal brainstorming.” The individual’s imagination plays an important role in divergent thinking. Through the individual’s conceptual understanding, the obvious solution to a specific situation is
noted and placed “on hold” to explore other possibilities that may be outside of tradition or common practice. (p. 165)

By Webster’s (1990) own admission, “perhaps the most important point surrounding this work, however, is that what was once thought to be unapproachable and mysterious is now being studied” (p. 25). Put simply, Webster’s work is highly concerned with the cognitive aspects of music creativity in an empirical way. Aspects such as culture and context are not clearly explored deeply in this model and the focus seems to be on the individual like in preceding research. With that said, it highlights creativity through composing and includes performance and analysis as equal components of a creative product.

This is consistent with the other points of view throughout the history of creativity and music education in the United States that have been explored in this paper. There appears to be a consensus about the need for creativity to be an integral part of music education at every level and experience as opposed to creativity existing in isolation in only some experiences of music education. The question that comes to mind is: is creativity sufficiently involved in all the musical experiences our students have in the public school in the United States?

In a very short article published in 1966 in the Music Educators Journal, a young pianist, whose name was not revealed, expresses her frustration with music composition. She shares how she enjoyed a privileged music education. She took private piano lessons since the third grade and was also able to participate from the school choir. She learned about key signatures, notation, and piano technique. However, she felt that this
knowledge was not connecting with her in the way it should. Our unknown writer says the following:

All this was never related to me in a form which allowed for experimentation in musical writing, and that part of my education was starved. So you see, except for the piano study, everything concerned with music was along the average, random knowledge. This is what I blame for my obvious lack of knowledge about music composition. I do not know how to start. (1966, p. 124)

Our mysterious writer ends her article with some simple but thoughtful recommendations so that other students in the future would not feel inadequate around music composition as she did at the time. She calls for an education in which from a young age students are exposed to music in a way that allows for personal discovery.

It would not have to be a sterile, rigid instruction in augmented thirds or diminished sevenths or atonality or some other musical hogwash that no one can understand. It could be the constant and gentle training of the young mind to accept music as a healthy and beautiful thing…sing a new song that no one has heard before…introduce them gradually to the many and varied kinds of music…And then let them write some music of their own…Let them do themselves. (1966, p. 125)

The frustrations expressed by this young pianist shed light on the state of music education at the time. Her call for a different curriculum was indeed advocating for a more creative form of music education. As discussed in the previous section, the 1960s were a decade of creative awakening; therefore, our mystery writer is right on time with her concerns. It’s impossible to not ask ourselves whether the measures taken at that great time of creative brainstorming and encouragement have survived and flourished throughout the years.

As discussed in Chapter I, Maude Hickey and Peter Webster define creativity through four different perspectives: person, process, product and place. The process portion of this model is broken down in the following way:
1. Preparation: the person begins to think and gather materials for her project. In music composing this can be the initial stages and conceptualization of a musical work.

2. Incubation: At this stage, the person usually steps away from the problem allowing the brain to do its own thing.

3. Illumination: this is the moment where a sudden realization facilitates advances and progress towards the aims or expectations of the project. It could be described as the “aha!” moment.

4. Verification: The moment in which the ideas come together into a creative product. For a music composer, this can be the moment in which she listens to her music for the first time. The creator has the chance to continue editing and refining her product and could reenter at any point in the 4-stage model until she is satisfied with the process and the product. (Maude & Webster, 2001, p. 20)

As evidenced by this model, creativity through composing is a lengthy business. In this particular model there are four stages that could turn into several more depending on the revisions and editing that the composer will be doing. Maude and Webster (2001) point out that “it is important for the music teacher to encourage and facilitate more careful and thoughtful approaches to creative musical growth in the classroom” (p. 20). Maude and Webster perhaps are trying to say that that there should be enough time for revision, careful examination and continued work on a project. In the general music classroom this can be a challenge since there might not be enough time to focus on such lengthy
projects and it is possible that some teachers do not dedicate enough time to creative activities like this.

A study conducted by Mark T. Khien (2003), “Development of Music Creativity among Elementary School Students,” suggests that the ability for creativity that students show may vary with their grade level. He found that from grades two to four a creativity growth stage seems to occur while between grades four and six a developmental leveling seems to occur.

The appearance of a developmental plateau may be due to various curricular factors. Teachers working with intermediate-grade students, for example, may not emphasize creative thinking in students to the same extent as when working with primary-age students. Music educators may be primarily concerned with covering material or teaching specific performance skills that often draw on convergent thinking at the intermediate level. As a result, when working with intermediate students, creative activities, such as music improvisation, may receive less emphasis. (p. 285)

If accurate, it is interesting to note that this developmental plateau happens around the same time that the switch to large ensembles occurs. These particular findings bring light to what seems to be an obvious situation: general music classes are fun, spontaneous and creative even when time is a constraint, and large ensembles are less creative even when time is not a constraint. The literature certainly illuminates what could be another factor.

The great concern of the 1960s was to develop tools so that our music classrooms could be more creative. On the other hand, Custodero (2010), suggests that children’s values at the intermediate level “shift from figuring out for themselves how musical sounds can be varied to trying to emulate models who represent what they believe to be their own culture” (p. 138).

Maude and Webster (2001) are clearly speaking to the music educators out there. They define creativity and break down the creative process. This happened over 30 years
after the need for creative opportunities in music classrooms was made a priority that inspired great movements like Tanglewood and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project. In the study we have just reviewed, Khien (2003) suggests that music teachers might not take the time or emphasis to provide creative experiences for students when we have seen through the literature that this need was made a priority decades ago.

Research on creativity is ongoing and new strategies are often available, but it still seems that creativity is both at the center and constantly missing. The reasons for this may be plenty, some easy and some complex, from simple time constraint and standards repertoire, to even policy and current curricula. However, what seems clear to me is that there is still a need for more creative opportunities in music education and a space where the creativity experienced in the general music classroom can enjoy the amount of time that the large ensemble possesses, hence the need for the central concern of this study: a composing ensemble.

**Creativity through Composing Alone and with Others**

Composing happens in the general music classes in various ways. There are teachers doing amazing work with their students and that have the aim of placing creativity at the center of what they do. Alex Ruthmann (2007), at the time a middle school general music teacher, created a composition workshop in his classroom in which he collaborated with his students in a process that scaffolded their progress over time. He took his idea from writing workshops in which the “teacher facilitates their growth as writers through minilessons, share sessions, and conferring sessions tailored to meet the needs that emerge as the writers progress in their work” (p. 40).
In Ruthman’s teaching, he used loop-based software to generate initial compositions which resulted in pieces that emulated genres and music styles preferred by the students. The students listened to music constantly as they drew inspiration and even technique from their favorite artists. Ruthmann would be present to guide and help them if students needed help but mostly he was there to provide his opinions, reactions, and advice as they evolved with their compositions. He provided small lessons at the beginning and the end of the class that were relevant to what the students were working on at that time and which also exposed them to valuable composition techniques.

Students would lead the presentations and would share their work and their process with other students who would benefit from the many creative approaches of their peers. Ruthmann would walk around the classroom conferring with students as they work on their compositions. During these one-on-one moments he would talk with his students about their musical intentions and the processes they use when composing: “These conferences help focus students on developing strategies for furthering their work and better realizing their compositional ideas” (Ruthmann, 2007, p. 41). After large projects were finished, Ruthmann and his students had celebration parties in which they shared their music with one another.

Ruthmann is placing creativity at the center of his teaching and going that extra mile when it comes to planning, scaffolding and providing the students with unique experiences. He is seen devoting time to the process of composing in his classrooms which happens through the workshops he has in place. From his publication we can infer that the atmosphere in the class is a favorable one: students are making choices and
creating their own music, they are doing it in a way that is relevant to their life context, and they have in their teacher and peers a good support system.

Ruthmann’s approach shows the great potential of the general music classroom. It is a place for creativity and process. However, I don’t think that Ruthmann’s class and composing workshops are the norm. Even in his class, collaborative and student-centered learning does not necessarily translate into collaborative composing. These workshops are amazing to read about, but most of the composing happens individually.

In her book *How Popular Musicians Learn: A Way Ahead for Music Education*, Lucy Green (2002) talks about how musicians come together in collaboration when writing original music. She shares that amongst the sample of participants for her study,

> Group composing occurred, usually by having one or two main songwriters who would come to rehearsal with ideas which were then embellished to varying degrees by the other band members, such that everyone to some extent provides an original contribution to the finished product. (Green, 2002, p. 80)

Composing with others is part of the peer-learning that happens in Green’s view of informal learning: “In band rehearsals, skills and knowledge are acquired developed and exchanged via peer direction and group learning from very early stages, not only through playing, talking watching and listening, but also through working creatively together” (p. 79). Green continues, “As with listening and copying, peer-directed learning and group learning form central components of popular music informal learning practices” (p. 83).

Furthermore, Green argues that,

> There is a theoretical aspect of musical experience that is, momentarily, virtually free, or autonomous of, the meanings of everyday musical experience. This aspect, which crosses over musical divisions and affiliations, can be reached in the classroom, particularly through informal music learning practices. (pp. 101-102)

There are five characteristics of informal musical learning practices.
• First, the students, or informal learners themselves, choose the music they will be working on.

• Second, the main informal learning practice involves copying recordings by ear, as distinct from responding to notated or other written or verbal instructions or exercises.

• Third, not only is the informal learner self-taught, but crucially, learning takes place in groups. This occurs through conscious and unconscious peer-learning involving discussion, watching, listening to and imitating each other. This is quite distinct from the formal realm, which involves adult supervision and guidance from an expert with superior skills and knowledge.

• Fourth, informal learning involves the assimilation of skills and knowledge in personal, often haphazard ways according to musical preferences, starting with whole “real world” pieces of music. In the formal realm, pupils follow a progression from simple to complex, which often involves a curriculum, syllabus, graded exam, especially composed piece or exercises.

• Finally, throughout the informal learning process, there is an integration of listening, performing, improvising and composing, with an emphasis in creativity. Within the formal realm, there is more of a separation of skills and an emphasis on reproduction. (Green, 2006, p. 106)

While Green emphasizes improvising and composing in group settings, most historical accounts of music composing present composers as solitary and isolated entities and oftentimes fail to expand on the different processes through which composing occurs.
Kaschub and Smith (2009) expand on the dangers this model of solitary composition presents to music education:

Different composing processes belong to different cultures and are evidenced in the countless musical styles that exist throughout the world. Presenting composition as a solitary role places excessive value on that particular experience and the music that results from that experience. It simultaneously diminishes the value of other practiced forms of creating and the music that arises from those traditions. Such teaching may send a message to students that the music of their own culture and preference is of less importance and is less developed, less sophisticated, less desirable, and even less musical. (p. 33)

Kaschub and Smith do not favor a specific process; they simply point how important it is for music teachers to consider which context best suits the task at hand.

Composers who work alone enjoy the freedom to do as they please. However “while working alone grants a degree of freedom from compromising with peers, it also means that the objective distance that co-composers bring to the analysis of individual ideas or emerging products is absent” (Kaschub & Smith, 2009, p. 34). However, music education does have a place in which group effort is the backbone: large ensembles.

Now, how creative is this place?

**Large Ensembles . . . Creative Space?**

I can’t imagine a music educator that does not recognize the value of creativity. However, research shows that “music educators devote little if any time to composition, arranging, and improvising” (Norris, 2010, p. 58). As seen before in this thesis, general music classrooms are creative places, but more can be done. This situation becomes evident when particularly in the North American context students reach the age in which they can participate from large ensembles, usually around fifth grade:

Although the National Standards are meant to serve as guidelines for music curricula, it is probable that most ensemble conductors are beleaguered by the
sophisticated levels at which students might be expected to demonstrate creativity. (Norris, 2010, p. 58)

This situation can be made worse by the teacher’s self-image when it comes to their own accomplishments in creativity since most of their education and training happens under a predominantly performance-based secondary music education (p. 58).

These shortcomings of the teacher training programs might be one of the reasons why music educators don’t incorporate much creativity into their large ensemble sessions.

Uncertainty about both their own creative skills and values related to student creativity coupled with the pressures of performance preparation leaves music educators faced with unanswered challenges of how to engage or begin to engage their students in creative activity. In the end, overwhelmed ensemble conductors more than likely will exclude creative activity from their music instruction. (Norris, 2010, p. 58)

The National Standards seem to set a high bar for creativity in music education for high school. Careful reading will also illuminate that group creativity is not something that is explicitly present. There is a call for group performances of compositions but the task of creating together is not addressed. I am sure that advocates of the National Standards could say that these guidelines can be applied for individual creative activities as well as group creative activities, and this might very well be true. However, there is not an explicit call for a space in which to compose collaboratively. Furthermore, Norris (2010) assures us that,

The current and long-time realities of budget constraints, high school requirements, successful advocacy, and community expectations and understanding of school music programs limit implementation and achievement as they are stated at the high school-proficient level. (pp. 60-61)

Another reason why music creativity might not be at the center of the educational aims of large ensembles might have something to do with the styles of teaching, the research
around it, the focus of the activities and the priorities large ensembles seem to have. For example, “band has been an environment where teacher-centered instruction in a large group format emphasizes performance as its main area of instructional focus” (Holsberg, 2009, p. 11). If this is the focus of many large ensembles, then it may lead music making into a place that lacks creativity.

Constructivism, “a theory of learning that describes the central role that learners’ ever transforming mental schemes play in their cognitive growth,” is a different approach than the habitual and prevalent teacher-centered one (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 181). According to Brooks and Brooks (1999), there are five central tenets of constructivism:

- **Constructivist teachers seek and value students’ points of view.** Knowing what students think about concepts helps teachers formulate classroom lessons and differentiate instruction on the basis of students’ needs and interests.

- **Constructivist teachers structure lessons to challenge students’ suppositions.** All students come to the classroom with life experiences that shape their views about how their worlds work. When educators permit students to construct knowledge that challenges their current suppositions, learning occurs. Only through asking students what they think they know and why they think they know it are we and they able to confront their suppositions.

- **Constructivist teachers recognize that students must attach relevance to the curriculum.** As students see relevance in their daily activities, their interest in learning grows.
• Constructivist teachers structure lessons around big ideas, not small bits of information. Exposing students to wholes first helps them determine the relevant parts as they refine their understandings of the wholes.

• Constructivist teachers assess student learning in the context of daily classroom investigations, not as separate events. Students demonstrate their knowledge every day in a variety of ways. Defining understanding as only that which is capable of being measured by paper-and-pencil assessments administered under strict security perpetuates false and counterproductive myths about academia, intelligence, creativity, accountability and knowledge.

(p. 183)

Holsberg, in his 2009 dissertation, *Constructivism and band: New approaches for instrumental music*, shares his personal insights as an experienced band director. He explains how as he became more experienced, he noticed issues of external pressures. For him, it seemed that band programs turned into competitive franchises and included competition at every level from seating auditions to actual competitions with other bands. He explains how he started to feel that “the competitive nature of the band experience might be confusing priorities for students and undermining the positive experiences that might lead to life-long involvement in the greater musical community” (p. 13).

This does not discredit the tradition that large ensembles hold. It is clear that the band tradition is alive and well and many students keep devoting their time to it. Many of them perform at high levels and become professional musicians who draw inspiration and foundation from their times at the large ensembles. It is safe to say that while some students enjoy this experience their motivations are mostly extrinsic. We might call on
“teachers and students to connect and extend the results of their study together, multiplying experiences in such a way that growth surpasses the limits of teacher prediction or external evaluation” (Allsup, 2012, p. 184). In the end, the success that large ensemble programs hold do not compensate for the fact that creativity is mostly absent in their practice.

Summary

Tanglewood, the Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education, and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project brought to light similar concerns about the state of creativity in music education. The 1960s were a turning point for music education and the place of creativity in it. There was great interest in the future of music education and therefore an interest in teacher training and in making sure there were enough guidelines to transform music education into the creative experience both of these two conferences believed it should be.

Thirty years later, Maude and Webster (2001) spoke clearly to music educators. They define creativity as a fundamental ingredient for a society that seeks to be progressive and democratic and emphasize its importance for music education. Even when research on creativity is ongoing and new strategies are available, it still seems that creativity is not at the center of music education. The reasons for this may be plenty, some easy and some complex, from simple time constraints and standards repertoire, to even policy and current curricula. However, what seems clear is that there still is a need for more creative opportunities in music education and a space where the creativity experienced in the general music classroom can enjoy the amount of time that the large ensemble possesses, a need that might be resolved with the composing ensemble.
Informal learning uses composing and improvising as fundamental ingredients to develop creativity. However, in other settings music composing happens mostly in isolation. Composers who work alone enjoy the freedom to do as they please. However, “while working alone grants a degree of freedom from compromising with peers, it also means that the objective distance that co-composers bring to the analysis of individual ideas or emerging products is absent” (Kaschub & Smith, 2009, p. 34).

It seems however that large ensembles are not fulfilling the creative needs of the students because of time constraints, policy, styles of teaching, the research around it, and the general focus large ensembles seem to have. For example, “band has been an environment where teacher-centered instruction in a large group format emphasizes performance as its main area of instructional focus” (Holsberg, 2009, p. 11). If this is the focus of many large ensembles, then this may lead music making to a place that lacks creativity. These reasons could support the need for a space that merges both worlds: general music classes and large ensembles.
Chapter III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

General music classrooms are creative, fun and spontaneous spaces in which improvisation and composition exist in different degrees. Time is a limitation in the general music classroom and students rarely have the time to re-work their compositions. On the other hand, the large ensemble provides the students with time to evolve and refine their work; however, the creative choices are usually out of their hands. The purpose of this study is to look closely and examine the experiences of the composing ensemble at UpBeat NYC.

The study will be guided by the following research questions: What does creativity look like in the culture of this ensemble and how does the context inform the product? How do individuals name, express and negotiate their musical values, ideas and experiences with others? Lastly, I am interested in the ways my participation affected the ensemble.

To find the answers to these questions I primarily employ teacher action research. In order to capture the openness of this process I held brainstorming sessions, conducted interviews, and kept a personal journal. At the end of the study I analyzed all data sources, together with the scores, and music recordings.
Method

While brainstorming and researching for an appropriate method for this study I struggled to find a methodology that would be coherent with my inquiry. I decided to use a participatory action research design because of the importance that is given to participant’s involvement at every step of the way, from the design of the study to the analysis. This idea seemed attractive since the premise of my study is that large ensembles do not offer students enough chance for creativity and choice and this method would grant the participants complete involvement in the study.

However, in participatory action research, most of the time the point of inquiry is defined by the participants. There is a specific situation or problem that affects the community and the community, being fully aware of the problem, decide to take action in the process towards resolution. In that case, the involvement of participants becomes a necessity for the research and the solution to the specific problem at hand. Therefore, a research design like this is very common in health-related studies.

A good example can be an outbreak in a community that forces its members to become involved in the research that needs to happen to understand that particular health phenomenon. Even when I see the lack of creative outlets in public schools as a problem that directly concerns students and their development, the students I had the pleasure of working with did not articulate these concerns. Up until that point, I was very enthusiastic about PAR but the more I studied it the more I started to think that I needed a different approach.

When I decided that PAR would not work for my study, I began to look for alternatives that would be similar but that were a better match for what I was doing and
that’s when teacher action research came into the picture. Pine (2008) defines teacher action research as a process that involves the inquiry about a specific problem while simultaneously taking action to solve it: “It is a sustained, intentional, recursive, and dynamic process of inquiry in which the teacher takes an action—purposefully and ethically in a specific classroom context—to improve teaching/learning” (p. 30).

Yorks (2005) presents action research as “an orientation to inquiry and not a specific methodology. One implication of this position is that there is no dogma of orthodox way of conducting an AR project. However, this doesn’t mean anything goes” (p. 379). It is recommended that specific methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) are embedded in action research to help the researcher contextualize her inquiry in a specific setting: “The research process has to be explicit about its epistemic assumptions and contain agreed-upon procedures that will provide for self-correcting awareness” (p. 379).

Teacher action research is a non-linear kind of research in which practitioners seek understanding of their own practice. This paradigm allowed me to come into the classroom not only as a teacher or researcher, but as a fellow music maker and composer to the students. Yorks (2005) also suggests that in order to be considered research, “AR needs to generate learning that represents new knowledge and meaning or provide support for theoretical perspectives that have been tested against alternative explanations” (p. 379).

This idea was fundamental in my decision to do AR since at the time I felt that through our work together the ensemble would generate knowledge about creativity and large ensembles while aspiring to create and/or discover a new musical creative space. As the reader will see, a turning point further along the study took me to important non-
musical findings. Reflexivity about my positionality during the process gave me no choice but to adjust my path. To do so also responded to York’s point on AR: “Reflexivity in the research process should challenge preferred or expected outcomes” (p. 379).

At least six critical steps are outlined by Yorks (2005, p. 379). These fall under two categories: (1) instituting and organizing the project and (2) implementing the project, as the following sections explain.

**Defining the Problem and Research Interests**

I was familiar with how isolating the work of a composer can be. Through my own experiences at the music conservatory, some of them defined in the prelude of the study, I understood that the music I was writing could benefit from collaborative work with other instrumentalists. After I realized that, I changed my approach to composing. Many years later, having taught general music and composing classes in the public-school system I began to research the literature hoping to understand more about everything related to composing, education and collaboration. There was a mismatch between what existed in the literature and what I was hoping to find. Through my research I started to notice that composing in music classrooms happens mostly during the general music years. When students reach the age to play in large ensembles, repertoire choices are mostly in the hands of the teachers. Hoping for a place in which the creativity of the general music classroom and the time for refinement that exists in the large ensemble I visualized a “composing ensemble.” To realize there might be a space in between the general music classroom and the large ensemble helped me define the problem of the study.
Defining the research questions was an ongoing back and forth process that lasted as long as the preparation phase. First, they looked like this: The study aims to capture the openness of a collaborative work in progress. Such collaborative work can be multidimensional. There’s the collaboration in the crafting of a musical product that will be the result of composing, refining and revising, but also, there will be collaboration in the designing of such space. Therefore, I am interested in the experiences of a group of high school students with which I will get together to design a space in which we will collaboratively compose, revise, refine and perform the resulting work/s of music. [Second version of this sentence/ research question: I will get together with a group of high school students (specific details of setting) to design a space in which we will collaboratively compose, revise, refine and perform the resulting work/s of music. I will analyze the resulting experiences.] I am also interested in the students’ perspectives and experiences in having autonomy and freedom in designing the space in which they interacted and collaborated musically with their peers and myself. Lastly, I am interested in how this collaborative experience may have affected my teacher self. I felt that I needed to be more specific and clearer with the questions. The second version of the question set looked like this:

1. What does creativity look like in the culture of this classroom ensemble and how does the context inform the product?
2. How do individuals name, express and negotiate their musical values, ideas and experiences with others?
3. How did my participation affect the ensemble?
The final version of the questions, which are found throughout this document, looks like this:

1. What does creativity look like in the culture of this classroom ensemble and how does the context inform the product?
2. How do individuals name, express and negotiate their musical values, ideas and experiences with others?
3. I am also interested in the different ways that my participation affected the ensemble.

**Roles and Relationships in AR**

I wanted the students to be involved as much as possible in the study. I thought for example that I would start by trying to get us to collectively create a constitution for the ensemble. After trying to get the students to engage with this idea I accepted my failure and I moved on. In the following chapters I discuss why I believe the constitution idea failed and how the assumptions I had about myself and my role shattered. As AR is expected to be adjusted as it goes, I also decided that the regular brainstorming sessions I had envisioned in the design of the study could give the ensemble what I originally thought the constitution would. The brainstorming sessions were not just another data source, but also a space for students to give their input and to be involved in how the study was going and what could be improved along the way. Understanding my positionality was fundamental and it became central to the findings. At the planning stages of the study my roles were intended to be many. I was the sole researcher, and I was also going to participate in the ensemble as a teacher/musician. I ended up being all
of these things, but my positionality was challenged in interesting and surprising ways as the relationship between the students and me unfolded.

**Problem Definition and Data**

Initially I planned on collecting data from brainstorming sessions, interviews, focus groups and a personal journal. I wanted to make spaces for student’s voices as much and as often possible. Having brainstorming sessions, interviews and focus groups would give me different three data sources that would collect student’s voices. As the study progressed, the brainstorming sessions were not as constant as I had planned, especially during the first sessions. During the second portion of the study attendance was unpredictable and I rarely was able to get all 5 students in the room. For this reason, I decided to let go of the focus groups. Also, I decided to start the interview process early.

**Implementing the Project**

I developed an implementation plan for my project, which I will put into three categories, Gathering and interpreting data, Identifying meaningful actions, and Dissemination models, as follows:

- **Gathering and interpreting the data through an appropriate analysis process (both in the early stages of the project for diagnostic and baseline purposes, and at critical phases throughout an AR project for evaluation of findings and theory building):** My field notes and my journal were immediate sources of data that I had available every week. Some days I made entries immediately after the session, like for example, in the subway or on the bus home.
Sometimes I sat down to write while still at UpBeat. There were other times that I waited one or more days before I sat down to write. Re-reading my entries and comparing them to entries of prior dates allowed me to regularly edit and re-vamp my approach. For example, as it will be shown later, analyzing early entries I understood I needed to implement certain strategies I had as “Plan B” to get things moving in the ensemble. During the rest of the study I relied on my field notes, journal, and the brainstorming sessions to monitor the progress of the study and to adjust accordingly.

- **Identify appropriate and meaningful actions**: As will be revealed in the following chapters, the study took an unexpected turn that challenged the assumptions I had about the students and about my positionality. These moments of illumination drastically impacted the original design of the study. During the following chapters I take my time in discussing moments and situations that I felt were meaningful enough to pursue even when the debate and conflict that resulted from it illuminated non-musical aspects of the study.

- **Deciding on how the findings should be disseminated and uses (who are the primary intended learners from the research?)**: This point became almost a philosophical prompt in the study. In later chapters I discuss issues and problems I encounter through my role as a researcher. Who is the research for? What does it do for the community? Who benefits?
Site and Logistical Concerns

The study was conducted in a non-profit after-school program in the South Bronx called UpBeat NYC. UpBeat was founded in 2009 by husband and wife team Liza Austria and Richard Miller. They are located in Mott Haven and they operate year-round. Around 150 students attend UpBeat up to five days a week where they engage in different musical activities from instrumental lessons to large ensemble and chamber music. UpBeat has 18 staff and volunteer instructors. UpBeat approach to music making and education is inspired by the philosophy of Venezuela’s “El Sistema.”

A good friend, a fellow musician and educator, has been working with the organization for a few years. In one occasion, while discussing the early stages of my study with her, she introduced the program to me and even offered to ask Liza and Rich know if they would be interested in having me do the study at UpBeat. After a few emails we arranged a phone call in which I talked about the study and what I would need from them if they were to accept. They listened to me carefully, asked some questions and agreed to let me know with certainty in the following days.

I wanted to meet with high school instrumentalists that had experience playing in a large ensemble for a minimum of 15 weeks. The group shouldn’t exceed 15 students and the sessions would be around 60-90 minutes long. These conditions, which appeared simple to me, in reality required a great deal of coordination on their end. Fortunately, they were able to schedule accordingly and a starting date for the study was set.

Starting in September 2018, the ensemble met once a week. However, halfway through the semester I began to feel that it was in the best interest of the study to extend it for another semester. This change required careful planning since the student’s schedules
in their other obligations would change as well. Liza and Rich again were able to find a
time for me to meet with the same students the following semester. During the first
portion of the study the sessions were 75-90 minutes long. The second portion of the
study started on February 2020 and lasted until mid-June 2020.

Participants

The participants in this study were originally intended to be no more than 15 New
York City high school instrumentalists. In the early phase of the study, the number of
students was constantly changing. During the first sessions I had more than 10 students
and then some of the students started to drop out until it reached a constant number of
five students. These five students stayed in the ensemble until the end of my time at
UpBeat. The second semester was less consistent in terms of attendance.

All of the students who were part of the ensemble grew up in NYC. They are
Hispanic and Black teenagers that have years of experience with music. Most of them
started their musical studies at UpBeat. Between all of them, there is representation from
Dominican Republic, New York, Ecuador and Puerto Rico. Camila plays the cello but, in
our ensemble, she mostly played violin. Marcela plays the clarinet, but she also brought
a saxophone a few times. Isabel plays the violin, but she exchanged her instrument with
Camila and mostly played cello. Rose and Romeo are sister and brother. Rose plays the
viola and Romeo plays the trumpet. These students are amongst the oldest kids at
UpBeat. They are involved in various ensembles and have different responsibilities.

Researcher Role/Positionality

My roles as the researcher were many. I made all administrative arrangements
with UpBeat’s administration to guarantee that the space was appropriate for the
ensemble. I coordinated dates and times for the meetings of the ensemble including an info session for participants and parents.

I anticipated and assumed that my roles as a musical participant were going to be many. I am a multi-instrumentalist, so I brought different instruments to the ensemble. At first, I brought my guitar but then I started bringing my viola. I did so for several reasons. I am not good at all with the viola and bringing it to the ensemble I put myself in a vulnerable musical place which I felt could help to build rapport with the rest of the members of the ensemble. It worked. Specifically, Rose, who also plays the viola, started sharing more of what she was doing outside of the ensemble with me and other string players provided small tips here and there.

As a composer I have experience in writing for orchestra, chamber music ensembles, solo performers, films, documentaries, art installations, contemporary dance companies, and original groups. I completed an undergraduate degree in music composition at the Puerto Rico Music Conservatory in 2010 and have worked as a theory professor at the college level. I have also taught composition to private students. From that position I also anticipated I could provide guidelines and an experienced opinion about the music being composed whenever needed.

I am also Latinx and my primary language is Spanish. I used to live in the same neighborhood as UpBeat so I considered it my neighborhood. At the beginning of the study, I was completely confident about the fact that I had cultural affinities with the students. In all honesty, I was relieved and excited because I was sure that I would be able to establish rapport with the students soon enough and that the community I wanted to build would eventually flourish. In the following chapters the reader will discover
how many of my assumptions about role and positionality were changed and transformed—sometimes through natural processes and other times through painful self-reflection and reality checks.

**Pilot Study**

In the spring of 2017, I conducted a pilot study in which I interviewed two general music teachers and two large ensemble conductors. I conducted interviews to each one which I captured on audio recordings on my phone. I observed a fragment of a class/rehearsal for one of each and I wrote down my observations in a journal. Lastly, I made an online focus group in which ideas about composing with their students were discussed. I later transcribed the interviews and analyzed them in conjunction with the notes from my journal and the online focus group data.

The findings of the pilot study were simple: these specific teachers didn’t have as much time to do music composing with their students as they would like. They all felt as if they were being put on the spot when I asked how they use music composition in their classes. At first, I thought I was making a mistake, but their reaction sparked some genuine moments in our conversation. From these conversations I could understand that music composing was indeed important for these specific teachers and that they do think about it and are aware that more can be done.

From the interviews I learned that planning is essential and that I should have good general questions, but I should also allow the interviewee to be open and reflective on the spot. The interviewee might be put in a place in which they need some time to think and if they feel they have the ability to do so then this can only be for the good of the study.
The most important lesson this pilot study gave me was about the importance of in-person focus groups. I found that even when doing an online-focus group is practical and easier in terms of logistics and commitment to attendance from the participants, even when the data collected from the online focus group were valuable, the nature of a face to face discussion is lost. The spontaneous reactions and conversations are replaced by an edited version that might fail to represent the openness of the subject in discussion. For this reason, I decided that the focus groups needed to be in-person. However, as the study unfolded, and I faced attendance issues I decided to let go of the idea of doing focus groups.

**Data Sources and Artifacts**

At the end of the study I conducted interviews which I captured in audio recordings. Throughout the study I took field notes and kept a journal. I also made audio recordings of the musical episodes that happened during the study and I transcribed some of them. These recordings and transcriptions became part of the data sources. My original intention was to devote the first minutes of the session to get together with the participants and have a brainstorming session in which we would talk about anything that was happening with our ensemble. In these sessions we could check in our progress, plan ahead, re-design our space if we needed to and share some time together. Doing so was not always possible but I made audio recordings and transcriptions of the times that the brainstorming sessions happened.
Data Collection

The instruments to be used in this study can be described as interviews, group brainstorming sessions field notes, the personal journal, audio recordings and transcriptions of musical episodes:

1. **Group Brainstorming sessions:** Every week the beginning of the session was a brainstorming session which, when possible, allowed us to “check-in” and discuss our next steps. These brainstorming sessions got better as the group became smaller and the students started to feel more comfortable with each other.

2. **Interviews:** I started conducting the interviews a few weeks before the scheduled end of the study. It was necessary to do it this way because the attendance was unreliable, and I wouldn’t know who would show up when. The interviews lasted around 30-45 minutes and drew material from our sessions and musical episodes. These interviews were fundamental to the findings because it gave students the chance to express themselves but also filled the gaps and clarified many doubts I had expressed in my journal.

3. **Field Notes:** The field notes were highly important for remembering details about the location and to maintain a chronology. The field notes were also a time travel device that would take me back to the setting and helped me remember and re-live certain episodes.

4. **Reflective Journal:** The journal is one of the main data sources of the study. It became a place of deep reflection in which I would examine and question my approach, my positionality, methods and other things.
**Coding Procedures**

In accordance to Guetzkow (1950), coding is the transformation of qualitative data into a form that renders it susceptible to quantitative treatment (p. 47). While I realize that Guetzkow’s views are dated, they provide an interesting perspective about how some academics used to see qualitative work. Ever since I began to study methodologies, I have noticed that coding is a concept that is always discussed. As a doctoral student I have sat through numerous presentations in which other colleagues and fellow students share their experience and approach to it. I remember being impressed with the depth of the process that some of them undertook. Stuckey (2015) describes the process of coding the following way:

The process of creating codes can be predetermined — sometimes referred to as deductive or “a priori” — or emergent, or a combination of both. Predetermined coding may be based on a previous coding dictionary from another researcher or key concepts in a theoretical construct. They may derive from the interview guide or list of research questions […]. Other codes [are] emergent, which means that they [are] concepts, actions, or meanings, that [evolve] from the data and are different from the a priori codes. (p. 8)

Both Guetzkow and Stuckey’s commentary on coding seem to be rooted in strict scientific foundations. Similarly, every course, article, or presentation I experienced referred to coding as a necessary step to organizing data in preparation for analysis. This rigor is important since qualitative study has not always been regarded in high esteem in the scientific community. St Pierre (2011) argues that since the No Child Left Behind Act took effect (2002) and the National Research Council’s report *Scientific Research in Education* (2002) was released,

Those two documents […] exemplified the positivist and conservative restoration in the larger audit and accountability culture that privileged an instrumental, engineering model of social science that feeds on metrics to establish “what works.” Notwithstanding claims of inclusiveness and in the
fervor of a new scientism, qualitative research was rejected as not rigorous enough to count as high-quality science. (p. 611)

Positivist researchers believe that “concepts and knowledge are held to be the product of straightforward experience, interpreted through rational deduction” (Ryan, 2006, p. 13). As I grapple with these ideas, I can’t help but think that coding in qualitative research seems to be not only a way of organizing and classifying data but also an answer to the positivist argument. It feels like a process that many researchers deem crucial to guarantee that the way they are treating data is legitimate and scientific. While I agree with the need to have clear strategies that ensure trustworthiness in research, the experiences I had conducting my study made me critical about the processes that are acclaimed by academia, especially by Western intellectuals.

When my study ended, and I sat down with all the data with the intention to start coding and analyzing I had an emotional reaction. I asked myself: “Have you learned anything at all?” As the reader will see, in a critical incident that I describe at a later moment in the paper my researcher-self was resisted, and that experience challenged my views on research. To code and to look for “deductive,” and “emergent” themes in the data I had collected would have been epistemologically inconsistent with the experience the composing ensemble, me included, had. At some point during my time at UpBeat, I realized that I was giving more importance to the study than to the students and I had to make a change. Codifying the data in such a way felt like I was dismissing the resistance and the experience of all who participated.

Coding felt like naming, appropriating, and colonizing. However, there are other ways of knowing not captured, validated or legitimized by the western imagination and lens: “By looking through the lens of the colonizer and his systems of critique we only
continue the hegemonic process experienced by the colonized” (Duran & Duran, 2000, p. 98). For me, approaching the data differently is a conscious choice to elaborate a narrative that is not bound by parameters of Western validity:

Western thinkers must acknowledge that there are legitimate forms of generating knowledge in the Native [communities] and that this knowledge is valid in its own right, standing alongside that of other cosmologies. (p. 99)

Rather than “coding,” a word I would use to describe my analysis process is reconstructing. In this context, to reconstruct is an effort to stay as close to a lived experience as possible, and to be vulnerable in the process which is ongoing and never final. For me, reconstructing is also an effort to prioritize the existence and the will of the participants by resisting labels and categories and by allowing their truths to emerge naturally. During the reconstructing of what happened at UpBeat, I experienced a self-transformation. Hansen (2012) elucidates how “moral remembrance embodies an ethical undertaking of working on the self even while aspiring to discern the truth in past lives and events” (p. 132). My process of analyzing and engaging with the data resonates with Hansen’s idea.

In reconstructing what happened during my time at UpBeat, I felt the best approach was to tell the story as sincerely as possible. Instead of looking for pieces in the data that I could categorize, label, and decipher, I weaved the sources as if they were pieces themselves. I read the interviews and wrote notes all over them. I was in conversation once again with the students, but also with myself. My field notes provided good descriptions of the world in which the events occurred, but my journal became a great source of reflexivity. Through the careful combination of students voices and my own I told a story in which I didn’t edit the many mistakes I made, and the many times
things were not going as expected. Instead of organizing my data by themes, I did so chronologically, using my journal as the base for the narrative.

Narrative research, as defined by Squire et al. (2014), “involves working with narrative materials of various kinds” (p. 7). For this reason, I decided to use various data sources from which I could extract narratives: “Sometimes, the narrative materials come into existence as part of the research” (p. 7). As the reader will see, a deep and reflexive narrative emerged from my journal: “In [another] case, the researcher might ask their research participants to produce stories. These could be spoken life stories, or photographic self-portraits, or day-by-day journals of events” (p. 7). In alignment with this characteristic of narrative research, I sought to create spaces for the students to tell their stories. These spaces occurred naturally during our brainstorming sessions and consciously during the interview process.

I devoted my time to reconstructing the story and through deep, ongoing reflection I was able to take a step back and become sensible to the emergent issues. I am aware that to take a stance against coding can be contradictory especially for a doctoral candidate that aspires to fulfill a degree from a western institution of higher education. However, I believe that it is important to keep in mind that anti-colonial work is multidimensional and ongoing. Little by little but with a steady pulse, I resist the colonizer, even the one within me, every day.

**Trustworthiness**

The inclusion of multiple methods, data sources and artifacts, and theoretical schemes is critical in establishing data thrust worthiness. To seek counter-patterns as well as convergences is essential to generating credible data (Lather, 1986, p. 67). For
this study, I collected data from brainstorming sessions, interviews, field notes, my personal journal and the transcription and recordings of various musical episodes. My journal brought valuable insights about the process from my perspective and became the foundation of the narrative with which I present the findings. The audio recordings and transcriptions I made from some of our musical episodes allowed me to study in detail the musical choices the students made.

These materials were important in understanding how the students were using their previous experience in a new setting. With the use of these I was able to adjust and re-design some of the strategies I had designed previously to better suit the needs of the students. As the reader will see, it took a considerable amount of time for the ensemble to create music, but the data gathered and related to that incident is monumental for the study.

In academia, multiple data sources add great validity to a study but there are other factors that also add validity to qualitative research. Member checking is considered to be the “backbone of satisfying the truth-value criterion” according to Guba and Lincoln (1981, p. 110). Tandon (1981) adds that “good research at the non-alienating end of the spectrum [...] goes back to the subject with the tentative results and refines them in the light of the subjects’ reactions” (p. 248). Initially, my intention was to do the traditional “member-checking” with the students. However, I changed my mind due to thinking that “member-checking” is a chance for participants to “edit” themselves.

I made a conscious effort to not misrepresent the student’s voices. I tried as best as I could to maintain a “show don’t tell” attitude while writing and including students voices and avoided to make personal and character judgments.
Risk to Participants

No study is free of risks for the participants. This study put students in a new and unknown place and there were many awkward moments. The very fact that inclusion and openness was being explored and sought in a space that aims to redistribute power was intimidating and confusing for some of the participants. I speculate that some students felt frustrated and inadequate at times which may have caused some of them to drop out from the study. However, these risks exist in most classrooms throughout a student’s life. The study did not pose any physical risks for the participants and there were no incidents of that kind.

IRB

The IRB process was mostly straightforward and without many problems. Doing the course was a little tedious. However, once I finished and submitted all the protocol paperwork, and after simple revisions, I was given approval fairly quickly. However, there was an incident that could’ve been worse for many reasons, but fortunately today is just a funny story. I went to France for a few months during the summer of 2018 because my now wife was working there and staying with her (and travel around Europe) was cheaper than staying in NYC and just paying rent.

One time after a long day of working on the IRB documentation in a little cafe we used to go to, we took the bus home tired and eager to rest. We had stopped in the supermarket, so I was carrying a few bags of groceries and she was carrying a backpack with both our laptops. We get out of the bus and start to walk and then I realized: she had left the backpack in the bus. Without saying another word, she took off her shoes and went running behind the bus. There was no way she was going to make it! I screamed at
her to forget it but she was not listening. It was an almost surreal experience: there I was, in the middle of the streets of Bordeaux, watching my fiancée running barefoot after a bus that was like three blocks ahead of her and going at full speed with my laptop, and all of the IRB documentation that I was going to have to do again.

I’m just looking at her in the distance wondering when she will give up and right at that moment, she stops a random car from the street! “Don’t get in, don’t get in!!! Ahh, she got in!!” Now I’m really worried, so I start walking down that road with all the bags not really knowing how far to go or what to do. I walked around 25 minutes and slowly but surely, I recognized her silhouette walking back with the backpack on. That car helped her chased down the bus and she was able to get in and miraculously our bag was still there!

Summary

This is a qualitative study that used teacher action research. The study aimed to capture the openness of a collaborative work in progress in which students and teacher come together to create music. Teacher action research, like action research is a non-linear kind of research in which practitioners seek understanding of their own practice. This paradigm allowed me to come into the classroom not only as a teacher or researcher, but as a fellow music maker and composer to the students I was planning to compose music with. Through this collective action I hoped to generate knowledge about creativity and large ensembles while aspiring to create and/or discover a new musical creative space.

The study was to be conducted in an after-school program in the South Bronx called UpBeat NYC starting the fall semester of 2018. The participants were intended to
be no more than 15 New York City high school instrumentalists with experience in large ensembles. Although the ensemble started with 10 to 15 students, only five students remained for the whole duration.

The data was collected through brainstorming sessions, interviews, field notes, my personal journal, and audio and transcriptions of musical episodes. As the reader will see and much to my surprise, the journal became fundamental to the findings of the study.

Table 1

*Study Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month(s)</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Advanced Proposal Defense</td>
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<td>June 2018</td>
<td>IRB Approval</td>
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<td>September 2018 to June 2019</td>
<td>Sessions at UpBeat</td>
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<td>May to June 2019</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td>July 2019 to January 2020</td>
<td>Analysis and Writing</td>
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<td>January 22</td>
<td>Finished 1st Draft</td>
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<tr>
<td>Late January to late March</td>
<td>Editing and Final Preparations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early April 2020</td>
<td>Dissertation Defense</td>
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Chapter IV
RESEARCH SITE

The Harder They Come…Wait, I’ve Been Here Before!

As I stand in a crowded Bronx-bound 2 train, I think about what I am about to do. I can’t help but remember my conservatory days and that incident with the orchestra. Will it be different this time? Am I really ready? I look on my phone to double-check my stop: 3rd Ave and 149th Street, and I say to myself: that’s my stop! Walking up those stairs for the millionth time somehow felt different. Once out, and as I took a first glance of what used to be my neighborhood, I felt overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by excitement, surprise, confusion, nostalgia and the inevitable self-doubt.

I remember thinking: Wow, this is fancy [code word for gentrified]! When I used to live here before, it was pretty run-down. They have a new square now with plants and benches for people to sit down and socialize. I stood there for a while, just looking around, taking it in. I used to live just a few blocks from this station by the St. Mary’s Park, in the Betances Projects with my uncle Manuel when they were still Section 9 public housing.

Since November of 2018 the 40 buildings stretching from 136th Street to 145th Street were converted to the federal Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) program. Allegedly this means that these buildings will now be managed and renovated by a private developer (Wavecrest) but will remain under basic NYCHA guidelines. The management change should keep the rent at 30 percent of the tenant’s income. Tenants
in other buildings managed by Wavecrest have complained about deteriorating conditions and a lack of response towards tenant’s needs and demands. These complaints caused a developer to drop Wavecrest as the management company for a new residential tower.

While New York’s City Mayor de Blasio assures that no tenants will be displaced, the community is worried that the mayor is making political promises that will not last, and that these developments are signs of the inevitable gentrification that is already changing the area.

When my uncle Manuel came from Puerto Rico in the 50s, he did so to a very different social landscape. Like many other puertorricans, he left everything behind and came to the US to work but ended up staying. He raised a family and in the ways he could, he would help his family back in Puerto Rico. When I moved to NYC circa 2011-12, he received me in his home just as he had received my own father many years before me. One of my most precious memories as a child is of finding a photograph of my father, probably taken when he was the same age as I was when I first came to NYC, playing in the snow at St. Mary’s Park.

As I stood outside the train station, I could not help but to think about how both my uncle and my father had their own stories in this exact neighborhood. They got here looking for better opportunities, and in some way or another, it changed the course of their lives. When I arrived here I did so with my guitar, a backpack of clothes, 300 dollars and the eagerness to make something happen. Like the neighborhood, I have also changed — and to realize that made me ask myself: Have I done enough? Have I done right by those who came before me?
Even when I moved out of the neighborhood, I would visit often. Whenever I got homesick, I knew I could get on the train and come to my “home away from home” and be greeted with a warm plate of food that only the most loving hands could deliver. Constantly visiting my Uncle Manuel and my Aunt Anita, or my other Uncle Moncho and Aunt Mima, with whom I also lived for some time, shaped the relationship I have with the South Bronx. Standing there, on the SE corner of 149th St. and 3rd Av, a strange mixture of nostalgia and anticipation came over me as I realized how important this neighborhood is for me and the responsibility I have to the community.

I started walking down 3rd Ave towards the research site. One thing hasn’t changed: the number of police patrolling the area. From the streets of Puerto Rico to the streets of the South Bronx, I’ve never felt safe around the police. When I got my driver’s license at 16, I remember my father telling me to not stop if a police car pulled me over at night until I found a well-lit place where I wouldn’t be by myself with the cops. The uneasiness of being constantly watched that the members of this community must feel all the time can drive anyone mad. I recall being stared down by the police when I lived here. This acknowledgment of how uncomfortable outside intrusion can be, made me self-conscious about my role as a researcher. Even when I considered this community my own and one of the few places in the city where I feel I belong, I found myself not willing to announce why I was there at that particular time (not that anyone around me cared).

When I got to the address Google Maps directed me to, it was clear that I was in the wrong place. At least that was my initial reaction. I immediately texted Rich, one of the administrators, to make sure I was in the right place. It was a brownstone home that
looked like it was divided into multiple apartments. Then I started thinking, who knows? Maybe I am in the right place. When the administrator got back to me, he said they were located at a church that happened to be at the other end of the block from where I was standing. A Google Maps glitch? Maybe.

As I approached the church, I could see it was an old granite and brick building of at least three stories with limestone trim. Later I learned that the building was constructed in 1901-02. I could see it had two entrances. What seemed like the main one is at the base of a square tower set at an angle to the corner of the block in which the church lies. The second entrance, the one closest to me as I approached, appeared to be more of a side entrance. It has a red double door with security screens over some sort of decorative glass windows. I saw kids with instruments going in through that door, so I walked over.

At the door a teenager that was about to go in was very kind and held the door open for me. Once inside I stood for a moment in what resembled a little parlor and just looked around. There was a staircase to my right side that went up to a place I couldn’t figure out just yet. In front of me, I could see a couple of descending steps that would put me at the level of what from where I was standing looked like a classroom on the left side, and a small utility area at the right, possibly a bathroom. From that level, another couple of descending steps led into a bigger room, (which I will call “main room”) where I could see tables and chairs where adults and children were sitting down. I could hear instruments being played and I could see some students getting ready to play theirs.

Really close to the entrance door and to the left of where I had been standing all this time, was a table with a sign-in list. As I wrote my name down, I was greeted by
Rich. He was carrying a baby girl, sound asleep. He recognized me and gave me a warm welcome. Following his invitation, I came down the first group of steps and he showed me the classroom in the left and told me I would be working in there with the students.

The classroom was spacious. The right-side wall is made from glass and had some shades. If you open the shades, you could see down into the main room. The ceiling is high and there is a wall-to-wall carpet in the floor. There is a small altar at the end of the room with a pulpit and a piano that had a sign that read something along the lines of: “Please Don’t Use.” There is also another door next to the altar that connects with another section of the main room and in the short time I was there initially I could see people coming in and out through that door. Looks like the room is used for small services or other religious activities. There are many foldable chairs around. Some of them folded and some of them opened and scattered. I was told that various ensembles used that room regularly as well. I remember thinking about how comfortable and spacious the room was. It was big enough to be able to do small group work.

It was 5:00pm and I was scheduled to meet the students at 5:30pm so he told me I could wait in the main room. I sat down on one of the tables and looked around. That main room/space could be said to be an auditorium. Even when there are no fixed rows of chairs, there is a stage at the northern part of the room. I could imagine that they use the room for events and performances. It’s ample and looks like it can fit a lot of people. From where I was sitting, looking towards the southwestern corner of the room, I could see a storage room full of what looked like instrument cases, music stands, and other materials that are typical for music programs. Turning around, this time looking towards the northeastern part of the room, I could see there was a door to another room: a kitchen.
Looking at the kitchen triggered memories of my childhood when I used to attend church. When I was a kid, a lot of community building happened in rooms like this. I remember people coming together after the service to share food and to be with one another. These memories helped me make sense of why an after-school program would exist within the walls of a church. Putting my beliefs aside, I can understand the commitment that religious organizations hold to the communities in which they exist, and even it was too early to tell at that time, I felt like I was coming in contact with an established community.

As I continued to wait, I wrote this in my field notes:

> The site is at a Church. As I approached the entrance a teenager held the door for me, he had a big smile. (I can see now he has a clarinet) I signed in and immediately was greeted by Rich, beautiful baby girl in arms, asleep. He is very young, and chill, and made me feel very comfortable. He showed me briefly the classroom I will have to work with the students. It’s kinda rainy today so attendance might not be as good as usual. It’s 5:05 right now and I will begin at 5:30. Today will be an introductory day, sort of a meet and greet. I’ll explain what will be done and will have consent forms signed. (11 Oct., 2018)

**The Site: UpBeat**

At 5:30 sharp I walked over to the room I had been assigned to. The first day’s plan was simple: to explain what all of this was about, to answer questions and to hand out consent forms, and hopefully all the students would agree to participate. I knew that the students at the very least were aware of some general details about what was going to happen. A dear friend and esteemed colleague had been instrumental in establishing a connection with the site. She had been working on the program for a few years now and put in a good word for me with the administrators, the husband and wife team Rich and Liza. They had been recruiting students for the study for some weeks now, but in all
honesty, I had no idea what they knew about me. It couldn’t be much: a guy from Columbia University that is doing a study about composing. I felt uncomfortable with that label (even though I was making it up or giving it to myself) and was eager to show the students who would participate that there was more to this experience than that.

As I waited, I asked myself, a basic question that is fundamental to culturally responsive, sustaining, and relevant pedagogy: What do I know about the students I am about to meet? “Much intellectual ability and many kinds of intelligences are lying untapped in ethnically diverse students” (Gay, 2018, p. 21). They are certainly more than high school instrumentalists with large ensemble experiences, which is the description I gave for the qualities of the would-be “participants” when I was designing the study.

I couldn’t control making assumptions about the students that would participate in the study. I don’t think anyone could. I didn’t see that as a bad thing necessarily. However, even when I felt confident and at ease with the assumptions, I had made about the students who would participate in the study, I knew I had to be careful. I figured they would most likely be kids from the neighborhood, so that meant mostly hispanic and black kids. This made me think it wouldn’t be difficult to establish rapport with them. After all, we shared some cultural background and that could be a good starting point. At the time, I felt that I couldn’t have found a better site to conduct research.

As mentioned, the study site is in a South Bronx after school program that is part of “El Sistema Network” called UpBeat NYC. Before I even approached the administrators with the idea of doing the study at their program, I read everything I could about them and about what they do. They are a free of charge after school music
program open to all children regardless of their musical abilities. You will meet Rose soon, but she describes the program the following way:

UpBeat is a charity and they empower other individuals through music. I would say for me it’s a way to free my mind. I like coming here and I like playing the instrument. It’s a way to enjoy the music. It’s not like just you being taught. It’s a moment where you’re learning something new but you’re also having fun because music is so fun.

The following quote from their official website explains their mission further:

UpBeat believes that all children are innately musical and have a right to high quality, long-term music education. We actively seek to recruit those often excluded due to economic and social barriers […] We aim to preserve and nurture children’s natural exuberance for music. Along the road to disciplined mastery of technique and interpretation, there is always a very human need to joyfully express […] UpBeat participants learn to collaborate in a variety of roles - as learners, teammates, peer teachers and leaders. From the earliest stages of study, students participate in small and large ensembles where the highest goal is to create beauty through musical understanding and agreement […] We encourage our students to dream big and take small steps. As they become accustomed to a gradual yet constant process of learning, they experience and internalize a resolve which can be employed to shape all aspects of their lives. (upbeatnyc.org)

From their website I also learned they offer two main programs:

**Pre-Orchestra Program**

This program is for the youngest students and the learning happens through singing, dancing, moving and games. Fundamentals of music are covered, and the curriculum is based on Kodaly.

**Orchestra Program**

The students enrolled in this program participate in:

- **Private lessons** – It is a master-apprentice approach in which the students follow their teacher’s recommendations for technical development. It seems that there is
some flexibility with the instruments the students play. Romeo, another participant, shared with me that,

Depending on your schedule, you don’t have to just reside to one instrument. As long as your schedule’s great, you can pick almost any instrument you want. You could sign up for it or just look around. That’s what happened to me. My main instrument was trumpet, but I wound up looking around and getting side lessons for drum classes, side lessons for piano. It’s like, depending on the teacher you have or depending on how many instruments there are, you may get into more than one class.

**Group Lessons** – As it appears in their website:

Studying instrumental performance in a group allows children to experience music within a context of friends and fun. Working alongside peers, students learn that making mistakes is a necessary part of everyone’s learning process. Through repetition and polish of technical exercises and repertoire as well as a focus on expressive interpretation, participants become confident musical soloists and ensemble players.

**Ensemble Rehearsals** – The students have the chance to be part of the large ensemble. In the large ensemble, “the skills and sensitivities learned in private and group lessons are combined with those of their peers across the orchestra to interpret repertoire from many cultures and genres.”

Rose and Romeo are sister and brother and they are both homeschooled. In our final interview Romeo said about UpBeat:

I like it. It’s something. Usually, me being homeschooled, I don’t really go out much. It’s not because my mom’s like, “No, you can’t go out.” It’s because I’m in the house, I’m focusing on my schoolwork, and I got my family around. I don’t see, really, the need to go outside. Until recently, I was like, “I want to start playing more sports and everything like that.” That’s the only reason why now I’m like, “I want to start going out more.” I would more so be in the house during the week and focusing on my schoolwork. Then, music class, for me, gives me a reason to go out, but then learn something new.
Rose added,

From being here, I developed an ability to be sociable. To be able to express myself when I’m talking to others […]. I developed an ear of music and a side of me that I never knew. I never knew I could play music or be able to do that. As the study moved forward, through my interactions with students and administrators it was difficult to not see and feel a sustained family like atmosphere at the program. I would even dare to say that students that I had the opportunity to work with felt very comfortable in the program. For example, during the interview Camila said that,

It’s a place where different people come from even in Manhattan, from different boroughs they come from, and they come to study music over here because maybe where they live, they don’t get that experience. And everything is given to us for free and we give it with care because they’re helping us learn so it’s just important to know that Upbeat is a second family because they take care of you as if you were their own little sister or brother or their little child.

Rose said that “it just feels like a family kind of thing when I have my classmates and my peers. When we play pieces and then we play them for concerts, I have a feeling like we all did this. My UpBeat family, we all did this.” These comments made me think about my musical beginnings and how making music with others, at least in my experiences, made me feel closer to them.

There was no way I could anticipate these accounts the first day I met the students. As I said before, while I was sitting down in that classroom waiting for the students to show up, I only had assumptions. These assumptions were based on the information available to me about the program and my own experiences having lived in the neighborhood for some time. Time validated some of my assumptions but also made me face some devastating truths about myself as a teacher and most importantly in this instance, as a researcher.
Meeting the Students

The first kid to show up looks really young. I remember thinking there’s no way he is a high schooler. Then I remembered that in one of the emails I had with the administrators, they mentioned a kid who played the flute who was advanced for his age and was interested in participating in the ensemble and I said yes. I said, “Hello.” He replied with modesty and sat down. He was looking at me with deep attention, figuring me out. I recall being nervous about this interaction and slowly started to lose my cool. I am usually good at making conversation with others, but I started feeling underprepared for the meeting that was about to happen. I had gotten used to the novelty of my classes in the public school where I taught at the time. Every new school year, around 20 students walk into my classroom knowing they will be handling a violin for the first time, or in the case of my older students, handling a computer and a piano keyboard. There were no fancy gadgets to back me up this time, I was by myself.

In a matter of minutes, the classroom was full of students. There were at least 15-17 students. I greeted them as they arrived, but I waited a few minutes to start so that everyone that was coming could have some more time to arrive. Also, I was strategizing. As I waited, I just observed. Some students were talking amongst themselves; others were staring at me, waiting for me to start doing something. After around 10 minutes I officially introduced myself to the group. I told them a little bit about who I was and what I do in general. I asked the students to introduce themselves and to share some of their musical experiences.

I could feel a great deal of discomfort in the room with having to talk in front of others. Most of them were not sharing as much as I felt they could. Liza, now holding
the baby girl, had just entered the room and was observing. I could see in her expression some frustration and the desire for the students to share more. At some moment our eyes met, and I felt that she understood I was trying to give them the choice of sharing as much as they wanted to.

I imagined that they spend most of their time playing music, not talking. With this assumption in mind I asked if anyone wanted to play something. I had no idea I was about to get my first lesson. Everyone but one student remained quiet. She asked me, “Why don’t you play something?” About this, I later wrote the following in my journal:

One girl was making faces and stuff, typical teenager stuff, super good. I asked them to play something and she was like, “why don’t YOU play something?” I tried but the piano was off-limits. I embraced the awkwardness. I’m trying to make them feel at ease, I mean, as much as they can since they will def see me as a teacher. (11 Oct., 2018)

It was clear that earning their trust was going to be difficult. *Who was I anyway and why should they care?* I immediately changed my strategy and discussed the details of the study. There were no parents present in this session, so I gave everyone a copy of the parental consent form to take home with them. I told the students I was completely available to explain in detail the study and the consent forms to any of the parents especially those who only spoke Spanish. I also explained the assent form for minors and handed them out. There were no questions, so I let them go early. It was agreed that those students who wanted to participate, they would come back next week with their consent forms signed.

When the info session was over, I met one of the parents, the only parent I met during the whole study. Both of her kids, a trumpet player and a viola player, were interested in the ensemble. I had a brief conversation with her and generally explained
what the study was about. I could feel a genuine interest and concern coming from her. She was attentive and her questions were thoughtful. I could sense that she was gathering as much information as she could before making the final decision. Later I learned that she homeschooled her children.

After the conversation ended, I had a chance to have a long talk with Liza. We had exchanged emails and spoke on the phone before, but this was the first time we were meeting in person. I expressed my gratitude for their help with the logistics that made it possible for the study to be underway. She shared with me many other things the students do on UpBeat. She told me about the small ensembles, the Jazz Orchestra and how many of the students that I had just met are constantly participating from a myriad of musical activities. I expressed how my first goal was to gain their trust and that I knew that would take time. She told me that she admired the way I gave the students space to hold on to the things they don’t want to share yet and offered to be of help in the event I needed anything else. Her beautiful baby girl, looking comfortable between her mother’s arms, slept through our whole conversation.

I took a brief moment to sit down again at the main room to reflect about what had just happened and to write it down on my journal. Through the awkwardness and the nerves, I could see that these kids were special in more ways I could imagine. I was happy to see them holding their ground, assessing me before letting me in. This is a fragment of what I wrote in my journal:

I just finished our first meeting. I feel great. I had a few awkward moments. Teenagers will be teenagers. They are great kids; I can already tell. I started discussing the consent forms and what was expected of them. Some of them shared a bit of their musical experiences. Most of them were quiet and kept to themselves. (11 Oct., 2018)
Flash-Forward: The Students

In the following section I jump in time to share the musical background or the stories told to me by each one of the students that stayed during the whole process. These stories were part of the final interview and focus on the musical experiences the students had before I met them.

Romeo

It was around the fall of 2014 or 2015 when Romeo was holding a trumpet for the first time: “I have been playing so far for around about four years now. The first semester was basically beginning stages where you learn how to hold the trumpet and everything like that.” It had been almost a whole academic year since I met Romeo and the other students; however, we hadn’t had the chance to talk about their musical beginnings:

Well, I’ve known the program [UpBeat] for about five years. My youngest sister, she started off playing. They had little classes in the library, and they were teaching her the basic notes. Not the notes, but basically beats, how to count beats and measures and everything like that. It was like the very beginning stages, but she wanted to play violin, so that’s why they did that.

I was surprised to learn this. Perhaps because my own experiences learning how to play guitar were quite different. When I grew up, I didn’t know about any place like UpBeat. If you wanted to learn an instrument, you would have to enroll in private lessons at some music academy. And in order for that to happen, you had to do it for some time so that your parents felt you had the intention of taking it seriously.

It was not until a few years into my studies that I started making music with other people. Romeo, in the other hand was immediately making music with others.
It started off with a good group of us. It was me, another kid. There was four of us. At first, it was five or six. Then, over time it was like kids started winding down because some of them [...] one of my friends here, he was playing trumpet and piano. He was actually the one who introduced me to the jazz band, my second week in. He was all, “Oh, you should come play with the jazz band, see what they’re about.”

I did play in a few garage bands with my neighbors back in Puerto Rico. I would sit at the drum set all the time; I was just so attracted to it but I had no idea on how to play it. Romeo’s story was fascinating to listen to because it was so different from mine. He said, “With the jazz band, I wasn’t playing the trumpet. I was playing percussion and doing Latin jazz. I was in that field, then the trumpet.” One thing we had in common was that the circumstances of those who played with us changed often: “Other kids were dropping out, to where it’s like, over the years, by the end of that first or second semester, it was only about three of us that was constant.”

Romeo’s enthusiasm throughout the study was admirable. He was always up for it, whatever it was. He had been very generous with me in all of my roles, especially in my role of researcher which — I have come to believe — is exploitative by nature. He showed up on time and would make sure I knew why he couldn’t make it if he couldn’t. When making music he would step out of his comfort zone and always made contributions that elevated our work. In conversations he never held back. I could feel he was committed to the study in every way. He was humble, talented and responsible so I was not surprised when he told me about that time he was made the section leader of the Jazz Band.

The teacher “assigned me to be section leader, but I wasn’t looking to be a leader in the class. I was like, “Everyone’s on the same level.” She was like, “No, you’re section leader.” Even though I didn’t enforce “I’m section leader, you got to obey what I tell you,” because I’m not really that type of person, I seen that happening a lot. They’ll come to me and ask me, “What should we do in this
situation?” I’m like, “Guess we could do this,” and it wound up working. I was trying to give someone else “You could lead it,” and it would just keep coming to me. I’m like, “Okay.”

As I listened to him telling me about being section leader I started thinking about my own views on leadership. I have always felt that a good leader is a source of inspiration and not a source of authority. I could feel that in the story he shared with me, Romeo’s leadership was about empowering his section even when they kept asking him to carry the load. I am not sure he would articulate it this way, and I don’t want to interpret his words, but this is how I understood it when he was telling me.

More than one teacher has recognized Romeo’s natural leadership before.

Another one of the trumpet players at the program was not very interested in performing. “He said that he didn’t want to perform, he just wanted to learn trumpet. Mr. Rich, he asked me to convince him to stay, but I don’t like pushing people if they don’t feel like they want to do it.”

After telling me a few stories about his musical beginnings and performance experiences, Romeo started talking to me about his background with composing:

I know how to compose tracks or stuff like that when we’re doing lyrics and stuff like that, know there’s a chorus. I know that there’s a verse. You could have a hook or a bridge. Then, the only gaps that were missing was how you use them. I always knew chorus. The chorus, I know, can be in the beginning. You could start it off with a verse and then put the chorus. I’m like, you could put the hook almost any [...] Then, I see the way how music works. It’s like almost everything’s the same. When I’m looking at a jazz band piece, I could see, Oh, this is the chorus. This is the verse. One of my uncles, who was writing lyrics, I actually got inspired by him. He was showing me. He was like, “When you write a verse, there’s 16 bars.” I’m like, “Wait, 16 bars?” I’m like, “That’s like 16 measures.” When I started looking at my music pieces, I started seeing “Oh, Section B is 16 measures.” It all incorporates into one place.

I had been working with Romeo for months and had never heard about this. I was fascinated to hear his experiences with composing. In the other hand, I was confused
because I had asked everyone in the group if they had previous experiences with composing before and the majority of the students hadn’t. I wonder how Romeo felt about writing lyrics, beats and working with his uncle. Did he consider that to be “composing?” Was he looking at music composing as a hierarchical system in which certain musical traditions are not even considered in the conversation?

I was asking myself many questions, but I could see a loving spark of illusion when he talked about his uncle, so I decided to ask him more about that:

Yeah, he writes lyrics. He actually did an album. There’s two of my uncles that actually do it. They did a collaboration and did an album together. Since then, the one I was telling you about, he does the lyrics and everything like that. He has three albums that he actually did so far. He’s working on another one. Then, he had me on, I think it was his fourth album, the intro. That was my first debut, my first-time rapping.

**Rose**

Rose plays the viola.

When I started playing, I was 11. The best thing was to actually be able to hold an instrument in my arms. I wasn’t paying attention that class. I was so amazed that I was holding an instrument. Then to pluck it or to hold the bow and make a sound was just like, wow, I made that sound. I’m making music. I probably sounded like noise.

She is Romeo’s younger sister. They have another sister that’s younger than them, but she was too young to be a part of our ensemble.

Rose and Romeo are brother and sister, but they are each their own person. I never imagined they were related when we had the first session, however as soon as I knew I started seeing similarities. They both treated me with incredible sweetness and were always generous. I feel like their generosity does not mean they were trying to please the teacher, but that they were also curious about how composing music works.
During one of our brainstorming sessions Romeo said,

I like the idea of composing our own music. What should we begin with? What it should be like? How should we start making the music? Because I want to get there but I don’t know how you start the tempo, the scale that we’re playing in.

Right after, Rose said the following:

Yeah I was finding this out. We were talking, me and him, were talking about through the whole summer and then it’s like come here and then you (looking at me) said you were thinking about doing that. It’s like wow. It’s like I have melodies sometimes in my head and I try to write them down, but sometimes my notes are not accurate. I think it’s a right beat and then if I have someone else play it, it’s different. You get what I’m saying?

This exchange led me to believe that they were so straightforward and willing to engage in conversation because they were also discovering about something that interested them before they even met me. I don’t want to interpret their words or intentions, but this is the way I feel about it. I wish I had asked them about it, but it didn’t occur to me at the time.

Every day before our session I would see Rose practicing her viola. She motivated me to start bringing my own viola to the sessions. I don’t really play the viola, but it is an instrument that has fascinated me for years. While studying composition back in Puerto Rico, I would analyze many orchestral scores. I would see that often the viola, definitely due to its sonic range, exists within the mid-range portion of the orchestra. It usually plays the inner voices of the harmony and there is not that much classical or romantic repertoire for it. I still remember all the viola jokes my friends used to say when I was in school. Something about all of these ways in which composers and other musicians treated the viola attracted me to it. In my orchestral works, the viola is often a prominent voice, not necessarily playing melodies but moving within the harmony with determination and purpose, not just to fill out chords. I became fascinated with the magic
of inner voices and how they are, in many cases, the foundation of the sonic experience 
an ensemble can offer.

I would ask Rose often about what she was practicing. We shared moments in 
which thanks to her experiences I learned new things. She even shared some of her 
learning moments:

When I first started, actually the second concert, I wasn’t moved to orchestra yet 
but in last minute they had us play a piece with I think the youth orchestra. I think 
I played rhythm n blues. It was like I was prepared but I wasn’t. You know how 
when you have a piece, you start from the beginning and then you end. I thought 
you had to start with the melodies like bah dah dah dah dah dah dah. I heard the 
vioins playing that, so I thought that was where I was supposed to start but I had 
lke two three measures of rests at the beginning and stompl clap. I just started at 
the melody. Then I realized later on oh god, I was playing that wrong.

She told me that she ever since she started playing music, she played with others. This is 
an experience I didn’t have. As a guitarist, I made a lot of my initial discoveries by 
myself. One thing is certain – everyone is in their own path when it comes to music. “It 
seems like the years went by fast but slow at the same time. I guess now I’m here where I 
am now. I just got moved to the advanced youth orchestra, so I feel good about that.”

Rose also shared with me that she had dabbled in composing before.

I think it was like two years ago. I had heard ... I don’t remember what I was 
listening to. But I came up with a bass line to go with it. Somehow the sound of 
what I was listening to give me an idea of what I could write. I wrote it down, but 
it was like eighth notes and it was just certain rhythms. Then I kept switching it 
and then I called it The Battle of the Strings. I was going to continue trying to add 
something, but I just never got the time to.

Listening to Rose share some of her stories with me triggered many memories. She 
reminded me of myself when I was a teenager. Composing music is not an easy task but 
when I was a teenager, I wanted to make my own so desperately. I would spend hours 
working on a guitar riff, often times copying and modifying some of my favorite band’s
music. At other times, I would play a record and just jam along to it adding my own
guitar parts, imagining I was part of the band. I came up with many riffs along the years
that were intended to be the beginning of something more, but I also couldn’t find the
time to come back to them.

Rose also tried to work on composing with a peer.

Then I also remember there was a time that I had a new classmate and it was me
and the new classmate, we were usually in class, but we didn’t have a solo piece
for the end of the semester. Me and him was going to play Allegro. I’ve heard
Allegro again, so I wanted to try to add some interesting stuff to it. I just wrote a
bass line. I was going to present it to my teacher, but it was gone. I don’t think we
played that day. It was just like forget about it. I tried reversing that rhythms of
Allegro. If it’s one measure and then ... how’s it go again? Okay. I don’t
remember it. But if it’s eighth notes, I put quarter notes in the first measure of the
bass line. Then if it was eighth notes ... did I say the same thing? You get what I
mean.

I indeed got what she meant. She was describing the strategy she used to re-arrange a
piece that she had already played. The only thing is that her strategy included techniques
I learned while majoring on composition in the conservatory. While I found this story
impressive, it wasn’t surprising. From the beginning, and through her actions, she
showed a great interest in pursuing her own creativity. She was the student that in my
first session chose to work with me. We improvised and played around with several
musical ideas and she was willing to take risks. Throughout the sessions she was one the
few who would often volunteer and seemed to not be afraid to be in the spotlight even
when she might’ve felt that she was the only one engaging. “I feel like sometimes I’m the
only one talking and then it’s like I’m the only one putting input or doing something.”

**Camila**

Camila’s beginning in music seems casual, however it may have been a series of
events that little by little accumulated. “I believe I started music when I was nine years
old. And I just grabbed an interest in music because I started in school and ever since I was little, music has always been a part of my life.” Music has also always been a part of my life. As an adult looking through old pictures, I was surprised to find many pictures of me holding musical toys. There’s a picture of me and my younger sister in which I am holding a battery-powered microphone. In another picture I could see a kid sized xylophone. My aunt and my grandmother gave me a little guitar at some point and my parents gave me a little “Muppet Babies” drum set. I was so excited about it that I can actually remember sitting in it. But my favorite picture is one in which I am sitting down holding a little electric guitar. I don’t remember it at all, but it happened.

There are pictures of a 3-year-old me next to my dad fixing an old guitar that belonged to my mother when she was a teenager. My dad also had an old guitar in the closet next to his “puertorrican cuatro” which is a fretted instrument with five double strings and one of the symbols of our traditional music. Growing up I remember he would take out the cuatro and play a little bit. Later I would curiously sneak into his closet and open up the cuatro’s case just to admire it. At nights he would set up a small am/fm radio to an instrumental radio station and I would fall asleep listening to it. Looking back, music was a fundamental part of my life and I valued its presence in my life even before I started to “officially” learn it. There were many moments and experiences that brought me closer and closer to start making my own music.

When I turned 14, I started to learn how to play on my mom’s old guitar. The same one my dad was fixing on that photograph in which I appear besides him. Not because I was intended to inherit the guitar, but because one day, casually, my neighbor, a kid around my same age, showed up with a guitar his father got him. He taught me
how to play the first three notes from “Come as You Are” by Nirvana and long story
short, here I am. Camila told me about her own “casual” moment one day:

And then just one day from school, I was coming home with my friend and then
her mother was telling her about a music program over here on side of 141st street
so then we came checked it out and then that’s how I began with the cello and
then throughout the years I’ve been playing with orchestras. I’ve been playing
with string ensembles. I’ve been playing with just cellos. We’ve had our own
little music groups. So, it’s just been a little bit of everything that I’ve been
experiencing.

Even though Camila had been curious about composing, she didn’t do any of it before.

I’ve thought about it but I never really knew where to start or what to start with
because I never knew what type of instruments there were until I got into Upbeat,
until I got interested into music, so I tried to figure things out but I don’t know
what might be used to create a certain song that I might want to do.

Marcela

“I came to start playing music in the third grade. That’s when I moved here,
moved to this neighborhood.” The way Marcela tells her story sounds like her mother
was responsible for giving her the push to start. “I started because my mom wanted me,
as an extracurricular, to start up music because it was a free program there and she was
like “Oh, okay let’s do it.” I was like, “okay” I didn’t have a choice but okay.” When she
told me this I wondered if she still felt this way, like she had no choice. “I mean, I still
come here. I could’ve dropped out years ago, but I still come here, because I like music,
because I like playing in an orchestra.”

Marcela plays the clarinet.

I started with clarinet for a good four years. Then as I started taking clarinet,
they also started putting me in saxophone, which I started as an alto sax. And then
I did that for I think two years. Then they switched me to a tenor, which is what I
play now along with my clarinet. And then that’s been my musical experience
right now.
When I asked her if during that time she had played in any ensembles, Marcela answered that she had played in more than one: “I played in an orchestra, a wind ensemble and then a Jazz live Band.”

I saw Marcela perform with the Jazz Band at one of Upbeat’s concerts. She was playing her tenor saxophone and as is tradition at performances, she soloed on one of the numbers. When I asked her about composing, she talked some more about her experience improvising in the Jazz Band: “So, we all do solo pieces. It was one summer; we all did jazz solos. We had to compose our own solo on the spot, given a set of notes he (the Jazz Band’s director) gave us, and that’s it.”

Something that was interesting and surprising is how she described a previous composing experience she had at UpBeat. Marcela was the second to last student I interviewed. None of the other students I interviewed spoke about it. She said that a year previously to meeting me they participated from a composing experience “for some random people.” She uses the word “random” frequently. She referred to me as a “random adult” at some point (more on that later):

They came in and they’re like, “Okay we’re making a song.” Here the thing was weird is that we didn’t use notes…we used notes, quote unquote, like they made up things that were like I have a clarinet, so I click my keys. That was a note and that’s how we made our song. It was awkward with them too. It was just some random adult that came in and said, “Okay, we’re going to make music.” Different from what we have is like we’ve always known Rich. We’ve always known our teachers or were used to our teachers and they’d give us music, or they make us play a solo and that.

From my perspective, Camila is fundamental to what goes on in UpBeat. She is a student and is also part of the staff. Not only does she play in several ensembles as she mentioned above, she also officially mentors other students that are learning how to play
wind instruments: “Because I’m in a wind ensemble. I’m in a jazz live band. What I’m used to is wind instruments. I’m an intern here, I teach wind instruments.”

Isabel

Isabel started taking violin lessons when she was eight years old and has been attending UpBeat for around six or seven years, but her musical story began way before that: “It’s a long story. So basically, at first, I was, I don’t know, two, three, and for some reason, I didn’t know what a violin was, but I wanted to play it.” The moment I heard these words, I felt a bit of relief. Isabel was not only stating facts about her beginnings in music, from my perspective she was also sharing how she felt about the possibility of playing an instrument. I remember this feeling. For me, watching other people play an instrument was like witnessing an act of magic. Somehow elements I could see and name, (wood, nylon or steel strings, and other) in the hands of another human, would produce a number of frequencies, by themselves and combined, and the result of this event was greater than the sum of all parts. Magic. Music.

I felt relief when she opened up about this because in the past, right up until that moment, Isabel had been avoiding me. Now, to say she had been avoiding me is probably unfair. Several times before, always outside of the official spaces, Isabel had been very kind and generous sharing things about her family and life in general. When I attempted to have an “on the record” conversation either with her or within the group she would keep to herself. So again, to be fair, I don’t think Isabel was avoiding me, she was probably avoiding the research she was under.

I asked my mom and I kept bugging my mom, and she was like, “We’re poor.” And she was like, “Okay, let’s see.” And so, I think she looked for a program or something. And then she found one in Manhattan, but you had to audition and
then you had to pay for the classes and each class was $2,000 I think, or more, I don’t remember.

I did not grow up in NYC, but in almost 10 years of being here I understand how expensive things are. If rent, a basic expense for every family, is so high “one” can only imagine what extra-curricular activities provided by private vendors can cost. I was shocked to hear that a class was $2,000, but not surprised. Back in Puerto Rico I was enrolled in a private music school as a teenager. Lessons were around $12-$13 for half an hour and around $22 - $25 for a full hour. By NYC standards it doesn’t seem like much, but this was more than 20 years ago in a country with a minimum wage of $4.75. All comparisons aside, my point is that enrolling your kid in music lessons is an economic sacrifice.

So, I auditioned, I was, I don’t know, seven. And they just gave me three, the violin, viola and cello, and they asked me which one I like better. I played it, they just told me to go like that. And they were like, “Oh you have potential, which one do you want?” For some reason, because I was a little, for some reason I said, “Viola.” I don’t know why, because I liked how it sounded, I guess. And so, they gave me the viola, and then they gave me a full scholarship, so I didn’t have to pay for the classes…chorus, viola.

At this point I was thinking that beyond her natural abilities, it came down to the decision of whoever auditioned Isabel and saw something in her for her to probably be in front of me that day. It made me reflect about how many other kids in underrepresented communities miss opportunities every day because they don’t have the right amount of privilege to be able to have the choice to do something or not. I asked Isabel if she had previous experiences playing in a large ensemble. Her answer was interesting. She obviously had some experience, but she felt like it didn’t count.

I think when I was, when I went to middle school, because they had an orchestra, and it was bad, because it wasn’t a school, they didn’t know how to teach. And the kids didn’t care, they just were there because their parents put
them there. So, we had a little orchestra, I was the only one that knew how to play. That was when I started violin, so I didn’t know how to read the music, so I had to learn myself, because nobody taught me. And I started playing violin when I went to middle school, and then I was the only one that played. So technically, I don’t think that really counts because we didn’t play that much together.

At UpBeat, Isabel is one of the oldest kids. As she shared above, she started with the viola and later got into violin. In our ensemble she mostly played the Cello, but she did play all three. In a concert with UpBeat’s Jazz Big Band I saw Isabel and Camila playing the upright bass – in the same song. They would just trade the instrument back and forth at the perfect time and they were really walking that bass. If you closed your eyes, you couldn’t notice the switch.

**The Composing Ensemble: Our first meeting**

I was so excited to start working with the students that I got to the UpBeat area a little too early. Realizing that I was around 45 minutes early, I took a longer route and walked slowly. As soon as I got there, I was informed that I would be meeting the students at a different room. The room is upstairs and to get there you have to go up that staircase at the right side when you walk in through the door. As I went up the stairs, I could hear music. Once in the second floor I could see the main church auditorium. It’s quite big. Doing further research on the building I discovered that the auditorium could host 750 people. The music I heard coming up the stairs was a cello lesson in progress that was happening at the back of the auditorium. The acoustics of the room were incredible, probably due to the high ceilings. To me, it looked like any other Catholic church. There are fixed benches facing the altar which is sort of separated from the rest of the space in the same way the stage would be in a big music venue. However, this is not a Catholic church; it’s a protestant Baptist church.
The room I was going to be using was in the northeastern corner of the auditorium and was very similar to the first one. Wall-to-wall carpet, high ceilings, and foldable chairs. While the first room looked like it was a place where small services happened often, this room looked more like a classroom for Sunday School. What I liked about it was that it afforded the ensemble some privacy unlike the first room which was somewhat exposed. I don’t quite remember right now if there was a class or a rehearsal in progress at the time, but I sat down outside of the room in one of the benches (something I later discovered I was not supposed to do) and took out my computer to check on my notes for what I would be doing that day.

I had two priorities: make some music even if it was just a unison major scale, and to collaboratively draft the ensemble’s constitution. As I waited for the time to start, I wrote the following in my journal:

Today I will attempt to create a constitution with the students. I hope the whole consent form thing is taken care of. It is my desire and aim today to make some music with the students. It doesn’t have to be original, just some music. Only one day and I’m already thinking that rapport is key [. . .]. I wonder how much different this would be with my own students, if I had high schoolers of course [. . .] every semester things can change and you’re back to square one. So, I better act fast. But at the same time, I don’t want to tell them what to do. The plan is to prompt them to come up with a melody of sorts. Let’s see how it goes. (18 Oct., 2018)

Around 10-12 students showed up and handed in consent forms. Some of the students, as soon as they sat down, like an involuntary reflex took out their instruments and started setting up for what would be an orchestra or band rehearsal. I let them settle in for a bit before trying to initiate anything. Around 10 minutes into our time I re-introduced myself and the students went around the room saying their names and their instruments. I could sense again how speaking in front of others made them uncomfortable.
When we were done introducing ourselves, I started talking more about procedures and how important it was for us to have some common grounds when it came to how we would treat each other and ourselves during our sessions. I introduced the idea of an “ensemble constitution” to be a starting point for our new community. It was difficult to explain these ideas without it sounding like we were establishing accountability guidelines for our time together. My intention was to have a conversation about how we would handle working together on the basis of respect, collaboration and camaraderie. I was very careful to not lead with examples out of fear of coming across as a “maker of rules” instead of a promoter of consensus. This attempt was an absolute failure. Not a single one of the students offered any suggestion or ideas.

After some awkward moments I decided to move on. The few experiences I already had with them were clearly letting me know that students felt uncomfortable expressing themselves in front of others, so I decided to break them into small groups. The prompt was to brainstorm simple musical ideas, it could be a motive or a simple melody, and to share with the group later. I said I was available to partner up with anyone that would like to. Rose, the viola player, came to me and asked to work together. We improvised and played around with a couple of musical ideas. She was eager to try things out and was not holding back going wherever her curiosity took her. When it was time to share, not every group had something to present and that was okay with me. One other group came up with a simple riff that could be looped and easily become the basis of a minimal piece. It was a piano and a trumpet and they were having issues with the transposition, so I helped them.
After class I met with Rose and Romeo’s mother. She had some questions about the consent forms. When we were finished talking, I wrote the following in my journal:

After class, as I was clarifying some of the consent form details to the viola/trumpet mother, I learned they are home schooled. I don’t know how I feel or how I am processing that information in relationship to my study and how they act. But they are very respectful, sweet, humble and are not afraid to engage. I instantly noticed this about them even before I knew they were brother and sister and absolutely before knowing they were homeschooled. It has been easier for me to get through to them than the other kids. (18 Oct., 2018)

As I had done the first day, I visited UpBeat, I took some time to sit down and write in my journal what I felt was important about the session. When I was done, I went home.

The Harder They Fall

It didn’t feel that different to walk through the streets of the South Bronx for the first Composing Ensemble session at UpBeat than what it felt to walk through the Puerto Rico Music Conservatory’s parking lot the day I had my first orchestral work reading. Both times I could feel a mixture of confidence and fear. I can also say I left both experiences with more questions than answers. The first time around helped define the center of my work for the following years: collaboration. My first session with the students at UpBeat was illuminating in ways that transcend music and that I hope to explore in the following chapters.

The first session at UpBeat, as described above, I would say was musically successful. Music was made in collaboration, not at the whole group level, but in smaller groups. I felt I connected with the violist as we explored with each other our intuitions, impulses and creative choices. I could see other groups doing the same even if most of the groups didn’t feel ready to share their experience and ideas. I felt I assumed different roles throughout the session, mostly the role of the teacher and an instrumentalist. At that
moment in time, I was concerned with being too much of a teacher and now I feel like that got me into trouble on the first session. My intention with drafting a constitution was to remove authority from myself and distribute it amongst everyone. However, when I proposed this idea, it felt like I was asking them to do something that was out of their comfort zone therefore defeating the initial purpose.

The words from my journal that I shared earlier can illustrate my frustration at the time:

The constitution plan failed. It almost feels like either they don’t want to be bound to a set of “rules” or that they as teenagers don’t want to open up and be vulnerable. (18 Oct., 2018)

As I read these words now, I can converse with myself and say: well, both reasons seem logical and valid. The students at UpBeat were already a community. They already have a constitution in that their community is pre-existing and already “normed.” The difference now is me. I believe that what I am doing can be of benefit for them. However, it is also true that I am an outsider that pretends to add himself to their already established community.

I found myself struggling with how to act. I didn’t want to be too much of a teacher but at many times I felt like I had to. And in a way I did act like a teacher. Some of the students were talking constantly and over other students that were either introducing themselves or sharing the music they had been working on. I tried to do it in a subtle manner, but I exerted some of the power that teachers hold and intervened a few times. Now, after being through the whole experience, I can see that I failed in assuming that I was the bearer of freedom and that the students would welcome my strategies fully and without question. I failed to give before asking to receive.
The harder they come, the harder they fall. I seem to stumble upon this truth again. The following fragment of my journal can perhaps illustrate my frustration and my reasoning after that first session while also foreshadowing some of the points I will make in later chapters:

As always, there are cliques, and in this case there’s a pretty powerful girl clique. They are talking ALL the time and they don’t engage. I get it. They seem to be self-conscious and asking them to put themselves in the spot is scary, so they put up a shield. I wonder if my approach is okay. Should I give them more structure? Should they see me as an authority figure for a little bit so that they engage? Why are they there if they act like they don’t want to be? So many questions. It’s a bit frustrating because what if they stay like this for the whole study? (18 Oct., 2018)
Chapter V

BECOMING AWARE

In the time leading to the study, I struggled over how much planning I should do. Of course, I had over a year of preparations. I had reviewed enough literature, chosen an “approved” methodology paradigm, prepared recruitment materials and designed interview protocols. I was absolutely ready to start collecting data, but I still felt uneasy about what my interaction with the students be in the ensemble.

My roles were plenty: researcher, teacher, musician. Yet these roles are not necessarily fixed. I knew it would be difficult to seamlessly switch back and forth between these roles. I was especially concerned with surrendering over to the students most of the power that I inevitably carried. This thought shaped most of my strategies starting with the plan to create a constitution. I realize that the idea of a constitution can hide ulterior motives. A constitution that everyone agrees to can also become a policing force in a group. It can be used to set disciplinary boundaries and to make the members of the community to abide by the rules established in it. My motives were simple but probably not clear: to dis-centralize power in the ensemble and to guarantee participation and engagement on our sessions. The students resisted the idea of a constitution on three different occasions. I stopped trying to make this happen after our third session. As I mentioned in Chapter IV, I was trying to add myself to an already established community.
When the constitution plan failed, I tried to find comfort in the strategies and the planning that had worked for me as a teacher. I started to examine the classes I designed and taught at the school I was working at the time in Harlem. Could that work in the context of my study? How much of the planning and thought that goes into those classes can be useful for the composing ensemble?

The class I designed and taught for a few years was a two-semester course. The first semester the students would get acquainted with the software (we used Garage Band). They would simultaneously work on compositional exercises that were designed to help the students understand the development of musical ideas. Each student had their station which consisted of a laptop, a midi-controller keyboard and a pair of headphones. During this phase, the students would work individually with the goal to solidify their technical and creative skills.

During the second semester the students assembled in groups. The aim for the students was to produce musical works through collaboration with their peers and using the knowledge that they acquired the first semester. Within their groups, students would assign jobs for themselves based on what they perceived to be their strengths and weaknesses with the various tasks required to complete their projects. It was normal to see a group subdivide itself to tackle various tasks at once. For example, a subgroup within a group might be working on lyrics while other members of the group would refine a beat on the computer or prepare the gear to record vocals. It took time for these collaborations to occur and I had to intervene constantly and mediate between group members. It was never easy, but there were many breakthroughs.
While the experience of teaching digital composing to my middle schoolers influenced not only my research interests but the initial brainstorming and design of the study, I felt that to proceed in the same way would not be appropriate. A regular day with my middle schoolers usually went like this: At the beginning of the class we check in with one another for around five minutes. We discuss our progress and we set goals for the day, and off they go to their stations or their groups. I constantly move around the room providing support as they work on their projects. When it is time to finish, the students help to take down the stations.

During the second semester of the course, the students work by themselves most of the time and there are few restrictions as far as what they can do musically. In the event an outsider would come into our class it is probable that they would feel like the students have a great amount of freedom and a direct involvement in their musical experience, and rightfully so. However, if I may be critical for a moment, I am constantly designing and constructing experiences that will guide them towards the goals and aims I have set for them. Through the experiences and through the process of creating music collaboratively, as an educator I hope they become sensitive and empathetic to the needs of others and to the needs of their community. I do this because as a public person I feel a strong moral obligation to the public. I have an agenda, and yes, it is a moral one.

I set out to dis-centralize power in the composing ensemble and in the context of the study, invite the students to be co-creators of the space. I wanted to rid the ensemble of my own agendas, even when that seemed and still seems impossible. The debate between my researcher role and my teacher role was overwhelming. In one side, my
researcher-self wanted to completely step aside and let the students make all the choices. On the other side, my teacher-self was strongly reclaiming its power wanting to take over to make sure that things happen, and that music was made. I was constantly in this in-between space, embracing the uncomfortable, doubting myself at every step, but trusting the process, nonetheless.

**Musical Strategies: Failures and Other Anecdotes**

After the first two weeks of the study, the second week being the first session we attempted to make some music, it was clear that there was a long way ahead between our situation at the time and a scenario in which we would be making music collaboratively.

At the end of Chapter IV, I discussed our second session and my experience working in a small group with Rose. Our interaction gave me strength and allowed me to feel at ease even though I was frustrated. I also wrote the following in my journal on the way home:

> Today I was an instrumentalist, a teacher and a moderator of sorts. I felt my teacher self-wanting to intervene to had some of them quiet while others were sharing. And in a way I did. I asked them to be quiet while others shared.

It is expected to have students talk while others share, and or while you are speaking. In my classroom back in Harlem I constantly try to find ways that would allow me to speak even less. But sometimes it takes me 10 minutes to be able to speak five. To have a student’s attention, in my experience, is no easy feat. The difference here was that I would have to assert my authority to ensure an environment in which students listen quietly to their peers. However, to intervene the way I did and to ask some of the students to please listen respectfully to their peers made feel uneasy and worried about the rapport I was desperately trying to build.
A little anxious still from our second session, I led a musical strategy at the beginning of our third session just to get the ball rolling. In this strategy I divided the ensemble in sections according to traditional instrumental families. Later, I assigned different notes to the different sections so that when playing together we would create a C major chord. I conducted changes to different notes at different times with simple pre-established signals and verbal instructions. I would call a section by its instrumental family name and asked them to either raise or lower their note by a half or a whole step. This exercise results in interesting chordal textures that can be tonal or not.

There are many aims to this strategy. It encourages listening to other sections in the ensemble. Not only it helps students play together, it also allows them to explore musical timbre, texture and harmony, all very important elements for music composing. By rotating who conducts, everyone has the opportunity to modify and transform the sound of the ensemble according to their own liking.

At the time, I saw this strategy as a scaffolding approach to what I envisioned the composing ensemble could be. In theory, the setting was traditional enough to understand and participate without too much explanation but also provided enough opportunities to transform the ensemble into a more collaborative space. In practice, things did not go as planned. Participation was an issue. Even though most students passed on the chance to conduct, three students did and for a moment I was able to sit with the ensemble as another musician. This event was important because outside of the classroom, on the way home, and during the rest of the week in between sessions I would often be filled with self-doubt. I always tried to leave thoughts of inadequacy and frustration behind during the sessions so that I could be as present in the moment as I
could be and so that I could recognize breakthroughs as they happened. This day I embraced the outcome of the activity as a small victory and wrote this in my journal:

We finally made some music. I failed at trying to draft a constitution…third time in a row. They don’t seem to want to jump into that. After I modeled, three more students volunteered to lead, and it was getting somewhere. I let them go early since I felt we made progress and I wanted to go home winning. However, for the last week I’ve been asking myself how much of a teacher I should be. Mostly in terms of moving things forward. I feel like if I intervene more, then I’m sort of not doing what my study asks for. (4 Nov., 2018)

This excerpt characterizes my mood during most of the study: acknowledging failed strategies and celebrating the small victories and above all embracing the process. Quite early in the process it became evident that the length of the study should be re-evaluated. The semester at the research site had started late, therefore I would not be able to complete 15 sessions before the semester was over. The solution was to keep going with the study after the holiday break until I finished the originally settled 15 sessions. However, the idea of extending the study for another semester was in everyone’s mind.

After a meeting I had with my advisor, I wrote the following in my journal:

He said (I’ve been waiting for him to say this for a long time, waiting or scared of it): maybe my study is a two-semester thing. I agree, especially so that the teenagers I’m working with, trust me a bit more. (4 Nov., 2018)

I was trying in the best way I could to establish rapport with the students and it was taking a long time. The number of students that showed up every week would vary constantly. Some of them were there but didn’t acknowledge me. For me this was part of the process of getting to know them, but I quickly started feeling self-conscious about my presence in the ensemble and wondered how the students perceived me. Later during the interviews, I asked the students about this. Romeo said he saw me “playing as the role of a teacher and also as the role of a friend.”
I didn’t know what to think when I heard this. It is unknown to me what meaning he was giving to the word “friend” in this context, and I can only speculate, but a part of me felt like he was stating that in opposition to what being a teacher meant for him. As I grappled with this thought, he clarified his comment for me:

At certain points, you got to take the teacher role to be “All right, sit down.” Let’s say someone’s playing music in class and you’re like, “Oh, this is the time,” or “We’re going to do this.” You may say, “Okay, we’re going to do this,” or “This is the topic for the thing.” As a friend, it was like we were addressing or negotiating with what we going to do or you put yourself on the same level as us, like, “Okay. What you guys want to do?”

As I have mentioned before, throughout the study I struggled finding the balance between my roles. Romeo was the first one I interviewed. He confirmed my suspicions: the students were aware of my struggles.

The struggle was you not talking, because I remember you saying you don’t like talking too much. So, I guess the struggle was trying to get the students or the kids to basically express themselves more than you talking through the whole session. So, I’ve seen that as kind of one of the struggles. Right now, what I see is that you wanted to make it where everyone was collaborating or basically giving an input, instead of you just saying everything or you just playing the teacher.

I might’ve been a little too loose at the beginning, in the early sessions, I remember asking the students all the time how they would like to proceed and how should we initiate our musical activities.

Then, in this case, you was asking everybody, “What would you like to play?” instead of as a typical teacher would be like, “We’re going to play this. No, we’re not going to argue. There’s no negotiation. You’re going to play this. This is how it’s supposed to sound.” Then, you put it in a environment where it’s like you have no wrong answers, basically. […] I know that was one of my main fears, playing something and I could be playing it wrong, doesn’t sound right.

I feel like there is great generosity in the way Romeo describes how he saw me during those initial sessions. Rose, also recognized multiple roles.
I saw you more as an assistant. So, we didn’t know what we were doing. This is our first time [...] And it was like, you were a teacher, but not too much of a teacher, and then like a friend, but not too much of a friend. So, you were like, right in the middle. So, it was like, I see it as an assistant. Just to guide us through the whole process. I remember you saying when we first met you that you were saying you’re more like our peer instead of our teacher. Throughout the time, I felt like you were more of the guide. You weren’t like super teacher, but you weren’t like the peer either. It was a different level because we’re going to still have to ask you how do we start this. I guess.

Her guess was right. By trying to not be too much of a teacher, I failed to provide the ensemble with the tools needed to do what I was asking them to do. The strategies for the ensemble were designed to address the different technical aspects of composing. The literal discussion of techniques, I envisioned, would result from the reflection of the strategies and not from me lecturing about them. Now I feel this approach was mistaken.

“It seemed like you were coming in as not well grounded.” Those were Camila’s words in our interview when I asked her about how she felt about my presence during the first sessions in the ensemble. “Because you kind of sounded like you were just letting us do what we wanted.” I understand why Camila perceived the situation this way.

Reflecting on my state of mind at the time, it would be accurate to say that I went in with the idea to co-plan the ensemble activities with the students. I had designed and prepared strategies that were based on my previous experiences as a teacher and as composer, but I thought I would use those as a last resort. In reality, I ended up using my strategies pretty early because asking students to provide input on how to proceed seemed to not be working.

“At first you were just like a teacher or some random adult that just told us to do something. And then later on you just became slowly incorporated into the group thing.” When Marcela told me that I laughed a little bit. It was funny to hear her say I was a
“random adult.” Upon further reflection, her words made me think about how odd indeed it is for a stranger to come into your space and tell you what to do. I am not trying to interpret her words, I am thinking alongside her, reacting to how what she said makes me feel. “To become slowly incorporated” into something means there was a time in which you were not a part of it. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, these students were a community before my arrival and I needed to be invited in.

During the interviews, I asked the students how they felt about some of the choices I took during those first sessions. This is a transcript of that moment during my interview with Rose:

**Yan:** Oftentimes I would make the choice of personally asking you ... not necessarily you, everybody in the group, what do we do now? How do we go on from here? I held back from telling you this is what we’re going to do now. Instead of doing that, I asked you what your thoughts were. How did that make you feel?

**Rose:** At that point I just felt like ... I don’t know how to say it. I felt like we were put out there, but we just didn’t know what to do. Imagine just being put out of your house and you’re just standing there like, what am I supposed to do now? I guess that’s how I feel. I think that’s how everyone felt. We’ve never done this. Don’t know where to start. It was just quiet most of the time and awkward.

When Rose described that she felt displaced, like, “put out of your home,” I panicked. I couldn’t help but think about how former president Obama appointed a Financial Oversight and Management Board to control Puerto Rico’s finances before he left. The board imposed severe austerity measures over Puerto Rico forcing the closure of hospitals and schools, all to ensure that bondholders get their share. A country with an illegal 75-billion-dollar debt, more than 50 billion dollars in damages due to Hurricane María and a devastated social landscape is not the best place to succeed. Puertorricans have been leaving the island since the 1950s, but the current exodus is alarming. Not
only the precarious economic and social conditions are forcing Puertorricans to flee, our 
land is being gentrified by wealthy settlers who are taking advantage of the delicate 
situation the country is in.

What is Rose really referring to? I asked myself over and over again. ¿Será que 
la cura que propongo es mas mala que la enfermedad? (Is the cure that I propose worse 
than the disease?) Could “home” be code for “comfort zone”?

Isabel reacted in a similar way when I asked her the same question: “I feel like 
none of us really knew what to do, so that’s why we just stood by and waited for you to 
push us to try to come up with something.” Just as Marcela did, Isabel also labeled me as 
“the adult in the room;” “As the adult in the room, I feel like you were just a teacher, and 
trying to help us come up with ideas, and you were guiding us to try to come up with 
music.”

As expressed by Rose and Isabel, there were awkward moments of silence. As a 
teacher I have learned to hold myself from trying to fill every empty space with more 
talking or more explaining. As I have observed throughout the years, silence after a 
question does not necessarily mean inaction. In the context of this study, I embraced 
those moments because I felt the students were assessing the situation. I was also 
assessing my methods and my aims as a researcher, letting the uncomfortable steep for a 
bit to see how that would transform or influence the ensemble.

Romeo speaks about testing the waters, something I can relate to because I did it 
and I still do it in various situations.

Yo, I don’t normally compose pieces. We don’t normally sit in a group and try 
to figure out pieces on our own. So, it was like, “Okay. This is new to us.” Like, 
I’m saying, it’s new, so it’s something that’s different. So, everybody’s not going 
to jump headfirst and be like, “Okay. Let’s do this.” A lot of people will just sit
back and go, “Okay. Let’s see how far this is going to go before I jump in.” So, it was like, when you lean more to this side or you know, more guidance, eventually, it’ll be like that point. We’ll be like, “Okay.” Now we’ll do things we can do. Or you start seeing people lighten up or get used to it, so then know they feel comfortable in this environment, and they don’t feel just alone in open water. They feel everyone’s there working together.

Camila felt different from Marcela, Rose, Isabel and Romeo.

Well, it really made me feel like I had to think a lot about what was coming next. And I know it sounds weird, but I like when people make me think. Because it’s making my mind go okay maybe this is pushing me to go on where I might be stuck. Or maybe it could bring me to a new idea then I could be able to share it with everybody else. So, I felt like that was something very helpful because then we wouldn’t just be depending on you telling us what to do. You’d be asking us for our input and how it might help us move on from where we were. I felt like if you were just a little bit strict at certain times that would be great because we probably would have gotten more done in the time that we had.

I agree with Camila’s words, but I also resist them. I could’ve taken the stance of a traditional ensemble director role and make things happen in a teacher-centered way, but the point of this laboratory was to push in the opposite direction. During the first sessions it would be around 12 of us in the classroom. The group size felt big and I believe it was delaying not only my integration to the group but the music making. There were times in which I felt I had to be strict like Camila mentioned. At the beginning there were times when there was much talking between the students. I was very conscious of not calling out any student in front of their peers, so it took a considerable amount of time to reach a point in which this was not an issue anymore.

During the fourth session, out of the sometimes 15 students, six showed up. This drastic change in attendance was a game changer and the session was successful in various ways. In terms of music making, during this session I used a matrix-like strategy that I adapted in advanced for the ensemble. The idea behind the matrix is to have the ensemble grooving over a loop-like musical idea that is layered. The layers are
independent, they work by themselves or in combination and can be brought in and out at different times thus transforming the texture of the music being made. Ideally, the musical layers would be the result of collaboration and there are several ways to do this. One way is to agree upon a tempo and a time signature and make every instrumental family responsible for their part. After some small group work, the whole ensemble comes back together and assembles the different layers together. Having different members of the ensemble conduct can kickstart the experimental and laboratory phase. In this phase the ensemble can explore textures, structures and collaboratively make adjustments.

This experimental phase can lead to the creation of a “road map.” The process is not linear, and it is okay to return to the laboratory phase to try things out again as many times as it is necessary. After having the experience of working things out with this strategy, the students can use their experience to create layers for other instrumental families. Once the ensemble feels comfortable with the layers and the structure, improvisation sections in which students take turns improvising over the layers section can be added.

In the previous sessions asking for volunteers to provide input or contributions with the intention of developing musical ideas didn’t work so this time I assigned the notes to the different layers myself. Having fewer students in the group made a significant difference. Not only did the students engage with the strategy, but it led to interesting conversations about improvising. From my journal:

Today was actually pretty cool. We were way less. Seven of us. Again, I initiated the activities. This time I used the matrix/loop strategy. We covered harmony, rhythm and melodies. It’s hard to put into words but things happened. They improvised while the whole group was grooving on one chord. They talked
way more about musical things, they contributed strategies and ideas. They opened up about how much they dislike improvising. They considered it “work.” Marcela said it is easier when the teacher tells them it is okay or wrong or out of tune, but improvising means they have to think. (4 Nov., 2018)

This comment was illuminating. The main idea behind the study is to test out an alternative space: a space in between the general music classroom and the large ensemble. A space that I envision as a place that empowers students to create and to have a say in the design of their musical experiences while collaborating with others. To hear a student, say that she prefers to stay within the safety of traditional ensembles was discouraging. As I stayed in the presence of that comment for the following days, I started to understand it differently. My initial reaction to it was to feel invalidated. Further reflection allowed me to dis-centralize my own desires and assumptions of what my students are supposedly lacking. Through reflection in my journal I came to understand I had to work on myself, to be able to evolve from a place of biased certainty to a place of inquiry, openness and truth.

Our conversation took a turn away from music at some point. Students started to share personal things about their life experiences. I briefly struggled with this shift because I felt we were making progress in terms of music making. However, I embraced it because it was the first time, I felt that the students in the ensemble were opening up and feeling comfortable around me. Later I wrote the following in my journal:

We talked a lot today (…), things about language and their experiences with their parents. All the kids in the room are first generation of hispanic immigrants and some are a mix of black and latino (…) I could relate to them in many ways. In the spirit of getting to know them I allowed some conversations to go for a bit (…) I do feel very good about today and the study. There are amazing and unique personalities in the room, and I am starting to feel familiar. (4 Nov., 2018)
I was clearly feeling optimistic after this session. I felt like not only we made progress as a composing ensemble, but we also started to bond with one another. Nonetheless, during the rest of the study I started to wonder how beneficial it was for the ensemble when we would take time to talk about our families and background. I would ask myself if we were losing music-making time with these conversations, but I would jump right into them every time. There was something about it that felt right and comfortable and I believe that was a feeling that we wanted to hold on to as a group.

In a brainstorming session that I had with Romeo and Rose before the interviews I asked what, they felt about the experience of participating in these spontaneous conversations. Rose seemed to think that it helped the ensemble.

I think that’s how we got comfortable with each other. So, I know just the five of us that were playing in there ... I think those were the same people that were telling their story, so we kind of built the connection with each other. We felt comfortable enough to be able to improvise.

I agree with Rose’s words. In the end, the five students that stayed for the whole study were the ones that would constantly share their personal experiences whenever a space for that kind of togetherness occurred. During her interview, Marcela also spoke about how she felt about our conversations.

That was, how do I say it? A good experience to connect with us because it’s hard to just have an adult tell you, “Hey, we’re doing this,” because that’s what we were told all our lives. We’re teenagers or we’re kids. We were told to do things. It’s like school, you don’t have a choice to not do homework.

Marcela and Rose made me think about the relationship I had with my composing professor, Alfonso Fuentes Colón, in the Music Conservatory back in Puerto Rico. Even when our relationship was framed within the master-apprentice model that prevails in many performance-oriented music schools, it was also a relationship that went beyond
composing and beyond music. The bond I had with my professor grew over time and influenced my growth. I trusted him; therefore, I was willing to be vulnerable in front of him. Like Marcela says, it is hard to have someone “just” tell you what to do. For me, it is particularly difficult when the work at hand involves creative processes. Creative ideas and input, in any collaborative space, can be successful or not, well received or not. In my experience throughout the years, the fate of my creative ideas affected my self-image. A strong rapport with my professor allowed me to be myself in our sessions and to push my boundaries as much as I could because I felt I had an accomplice by my side. The rapport my professor and I developed was the result of many conversations we had (not that different from the ones we were having in the ensemble), which helped us understand each other in a personal way.

The students shared many different stories that allowed us to have a better understanding of one another and of our complex and intersectional identities.

**Camila:** So, one of my friends, they found out I was from the Bronx, and they asked if everybody in the Bronx speaks Spanish.

**Marcela:** I can barely speak Spanish correctly.

**Camila:** People shouldn’t do that, especially when it comes to music, cause then, cause then it’s like you judge people on what they listen to and then they say: oh, they listen to… so they’re from there. Yeah like if you listen to Cardi B then somebody’s like, “Oh you’re from the Bronx.” No! Like what? I mean, yeah, for me, but still, it doesn’t matter.

As Camila experienced with one of her friends, I have also been the object of stereotypes or assumptions. I’ve been asked: “Are you Puertorican? Your english is good, you were born here in the US right?” Usually, I am not bothered by stereotypes like these and the micro-aggressions that result from them. I am bothered when people assume that all Puertorricans are pro-statehood or that we should be thankful to be US
Most of the students of the ensemble and I shared some kind of cultural heritage. At times they would ask about my experiences as a latino who was not born in the mainland US. I could sense they were curious about many things the same way I was about their experiences as first generation latinxs.

**Me:** All of you were born here, right?

**Camila:** I hated it!

**Me:** You hated what?

**Camila:** I didn’t want to be born here.

**Marcela:** (laughing) That’s not your choice.

**Me:** Why do you feel that way?

**Camila:** I don’t like learning here. Here is different. I wanna go learn in like a different country, In Ecuador or in DR (Dominican Republic). Because like, they learn, more, how to say this? They’re not spoiled like the way we are over here. And like, my cousins over there, my cousins that live over in Ecuador and DR, they’re not spoiled.

In our conversations we shared cultural knowledge and we helped each other understand a little more about how our experiences intersect. I believe these conversations were fundamental to our progress as a group. A progress that was not linear or as fast as I would’ve hoped.

Our fifth session was a difficult one. We had more students than the previous time, even students that had not been to the ensemble in a few sessions. This change threw us off. The students who last time had been sharing their stories and engaging with the music making that was happening shut down again. After the session was over, I was frustrated and angry. I wrote the following in my journal:

Today’s session was a bit chaotic. There was a student that was just there not wanting to participate, laughing the whole time, being rude. I asked her to join
the circle because having her outside was too distracting especially if she was on
her phone and laughing and shit. I mean, if you are not gonna do anything why
are you even here? My teacher self wanted to jump at it, I even thought about
asking her to leave. (8 Nov., 2018)

That was all of my entry for that day. I can teleport myself to the exact moment I wrote
those words as I am writing these. I didn’t know what to do.

To provide a bit of context on the situation, the student didn’t have her instrument
that day. She came into the room and right before we began to work on something she
stood up and sat outside our seat arrangement. At first, I thought that she felt excluded
and I offered her a few options. I told her she could sing, or play a different instrument,
like a drum or something else that she felt she could do with ease. I also told her that she
could help us with suggestions and conduct the ensemble after I did it a few times. I was
careful to tell her this in a way in which I wasn’t putting her on the spot while the rest of
the students were tuning and fixing their reeds, etc. She said no and stayed there. For the
next 10 minutes or so she was watching something on her phone and texting, laughing
and talking to another of the students in the room. Most of the students in the room were
paying attention to what she was doing.

I didn’t know what to do. The rest of the group were motionless just waiting for
me to tell them what to do. In frustration I thought: She was being disrespectful, and she
was highjacking the session. She didn’t have her instrument, she didn’t want to
participate in any other way, and with her phone out and laughing, she was preventing
others from participating. She was acting like she was completely uninterested, why was
she even there? The solution was clear, she needed to go. I almost asked her to leave.
At the same time, I was thinking about the success of our last session. Not only made
music together, we were getting closer as a group, or I should say, I was beginning to be
accepted into their community. I felt that to call a student out in these circumstances, or even worse, ask them to leave the room, might not be the best solution. With these thoughts in mind, I took a deep breath and asked her to put her phone away and to join us. She did. She didn’t participate but she joined.

On Nov. 15, our sixth session, we encountered a blizzard. I thought things at UpBeat would get cancelled but they weren’t. Coming back home in the snow was quite difficult. I wrote the following in my journal:

Today was an odd day. Snow came in and I asked Rich and he said it was business as usual, but I knew that kids wouldn’t probably show up. And of course, I was right. Then they asked me to finish the session early haha, of course. It was a nightmare to come back home. The buses were simply not running, and I had to walk a lot to catch the train back home. I got out of UpBeat at around 6:45 and got home close to 9 pm. (15 Nov., 2018)

Two students showed up to that session, sister and brother, Rose and Romeo. I decided to have a conversation with them that now I know was motivated by my frustration.

Looking back at the data I collected, especially my journal, as an ensemble we had had our accomplishments. We had made music together and we were getting closer as a group. However, in the midst of it, I felt like we were struggling to get out of the starting line. Rose and Romeo had been to all the sessions and would often volunteer to participate in various ways in the ensemble. I felt that their input in that particular moment would help me through my struggle, so I asked them a sincere and honest question and that initiated our discussion.

“Why do you guys think it’s difficult to get started? Is it because we don’t know what musical choices to make or is it something else?” They both looked at me for a second as if they had been thinking about this as well and Romeo jumped right at it.
I think it’s more so does everyone want to agree to the same scale that we’re going to play in or agree to the timing or agree who’s taking the solo if there are any solos. Those are the main three that I’ve thought of.

I asked Rose what she thought about this.

Let’s say I think of a rhythm in my head and there’s so many rhythms that we can do to make a sound really good. It’s like I don’t know where to start and then if I expressed them maybe everyone else won’t be okay with that.

I have been in situations in which agreeing about the starting point can be very difficult. This is especially difficult when you are playing with musicians that you don’t know. In my own experiences, in jam sessions for example, there is a part of me that feels self-conscious and shy about sharing musical ideas for fear of not meeting other people’s expectations. I also have felt like Rose, what if other people are not okay with my ideas?

I even felt this way sometimes about going to UpBeat and asking students that didn’t know me to engage in music creating with others because it quickly becomes a vulnerable place to be in. “Do you think that, to do this in a group, is to ask for too much?” I asked. Now I see things differently. At that time, as I said before, it was difficult for me to look at the totality of things and be able to make an objective assessment. I was too involved. Therefore, my questions were not formulated by Yan the researcher, they were formulated by Yan the person, the aspiring peer.

“I think it’s like, it’s a good idea, but then there’s like, are you gonna be the only one who’s expressing yourself and everybody else is just quiet and don’t wanna say nothing?” I was quite moved by Romeo’s answer. I felt he was communicating his disappointment. He does put himself out there week after week, suggesting melodic motives, conducting, trying different things, and up until that point, he was one of the very few that assumed that position as well. His words made me feel that even when
those discouraging moments happened often, he was still willing to keep going: “So, I try to do what I think here and there. Then like I said, it goes back to: Are you going to agree or disagree or are we gonna be able to do it together?”

Rose, who would also volunteer often felt similar. “Yeah, I think the same thing, just like, I feel like sometimes I’m the only one talking. And then, it’s like I’m the only one putting input or doing something. And everyone else is just like…” As Rose struggled to find more words to say what was in her mind, Romeo jumped in.

Maybe because it’s like a habit. So, it’s like everybody’s used to “oh let’s pick up the music and let’s play it.” So, they’re not used to like, actually being asked, “ok what you wanna play? or How you think we should start this?” So, I think that’s why everyone is like they don’t know because they never be given the opportunity unless they’re playing a solo or something like that. To be able to compose your own piece is a new experience, a new way of looking at things.

These words affected me in two ways. I was grateful with the generosity Romeo considered the macro circumstances that might’ve made it difficult for his peers to be more involved in our ensemble. His words also made me think that even when I was initiating the strategies, and conducting often, maybe I needed to live more in my teacher role.

I was asking for something unusual, and in an unusual way. I asked them, “Is it weird to be given that choice?” Rose replied, “It’s not weird, it’s like, it’s different from the usual. So, I like it, we’re actually gonna be playing our own music. But it’s just like I’ve never had that kind of question or pressure before.” Rose’s words reminded me of Marcela’s comment regarding how to improvise felt like “work.” These comments take me back to my classroom in Harlem and the creative work that was done in the span of a few years. When we started working on the digital composition class the students were ecstatic with the gear they would be working with. For some of the students, the idea of
creating music by themselves was enough incentive and they would work very hard on their projects. Other students had a difficult time. Some of them would shut down completely.

The class had specific prompts, for example: “create a percussion beat that can be looped.” Even with a prompt like that, the students had to choose the rhythms they would use, the digital instrument that would create the sound, etc. Some of them felt helpless with these choices and with creating something from scratch. I would constantly check in with the students individually and provided them with the support they needed to move from a place of re-creation to a place of personal creation. When Rose described feeling “pressure,” I could see my shortcomings laid out in front of me. I didn’t want to teach a group composing class, I wanted the ensemble to create together. I was beginning to think that in order to get there, I might have to teach a group composing class first.

After two difficult sessions, a more consistent group of students showed up at the seventh session. The group had been fluctuating in size every week, but there were five students that would always show up: Marcela, Rose, Isabel, Romeo and Camila. Later, during the interviews, I asked them they felt that many other students dropped out or would be inconsistent in their attendance. Romeo said,

Well, I thought of it as, like I was saying, the process of time. No one’s holding you, like, ”No, you got to stay here. You got to strap into the seat.” No, it’s to your own ... he gave the whole speech and everything. You don’t have to stay. I wonder if he was thinking that some of the other students felt they had to. His answer made me feel like the composing ensemble might be a burden on some of the students. Rose’s answer made me feel a bit uneasy. “I felt like the five people that stayed were the
ones that really wanted to do that, the composing, and they had the feel for the music.” I did not think that Rose’s answer was a fair. Maybe the environment in the ensemble was not favorable for everyone and some of the students felt uncomfortable and lost interest.

“I kind of felt like it showed that they didn’t really have a lot of commitment.” Camila’s words seemed harsh.

We signed up because we thought it was interesting and for me I thought it was interesting to try something new because every day is the same thing with music […] when they said, “we’re going to learn how to compose music” then it was like oh wow I really want to try continue doing this […] it was really interesting going in everyday and how we could all make music with each other. And it showed that we really did care for composing because it’s just something that we don’t do all the time, so we just probably wanted a little more of that.

I agree with Camila that the promise of switching things up a bit was very attractive at the beginning and I am sure that is why we had up to 15 kids in the first sessions. I don’t want to make a judgment on the students’ commitment because as the researcher and teacher I feel that would be taking the easy way out.

Marcela’s answer resonated more with my own thoughts. She said she felt, that they had things to do. A lot of them have different lives. Some of them did sports, some of them did things outside of music. Some of them dropped out because they wanted to drop out. I don’t know. I just stayed.

During the seventh session I did another one of the strategies I had designed for the study. The aim of this strategy was to explore how to create structure and tension without using traditional harmonic cadences. The idea is to find other musical elements such as timbre and texture to create transitions and structure. When I was designing the musical strategies for the ensemble I considered the fact that while all of the students that would participate in the composing ensemble had experiences performing in large ensembles, and had also taken instrumental performance lessons, traditional harmony
might not be a part of their toolbox yet. The question of how to incorporate concepts of musical development without concrete knowledge about how to create tension and release with tonal harmony led me to this exercise. After the session I wrote this in my journal:

Today we had more students, mostly the kids that usually come. Trumpet, Viola, violin, cello, clarinet, piano. Another clarinet that is currently not there, the instrument I mean. I believe that we are making progress in terms of rapport. Musically, we created a short piece that had a beginning, a middle part and an end. I discussed how we can create this effect with instrumentation, rhythm, dynamics, and timbre, not only with melodic or harmonic content. After I conducted a musical episode, Romeo also conducted one. Other students are still not into taking the lead, but I feel they might be getting more comfortable. We also spoke about documenting and notating our musical ideas. Next week we will start doing that. (21 Nov., 2018)

During the session I could feel that progress had been made, slowly but progress, nonetheless. We were about six or seven in the room and this particular fact was proving to be decisive in terms of how the composing ensemble operated. With a smaller group I noticed students opening up, feeling more familiar, joking around and engaging with the music we were making. At the end of the session I decided to talk about documenting our musical episodes. I asked how we could go about it and it was decided I would get a big music score notebook to annotate whatever ideas we would come up with to create a database of possible ideas for a composition. I was especially concerned that our semester was coming to an end and we didn’t have any music. While the group was becoming more consistent and the students were opening up more, I was still leading everything. The students relied on me constantly to direct them and to know what was expected of them during the sessions. The times I was able to take a step back and
become another musician of the ensemble were after asking for a volunteer to conduct or lead a strategy after having modeled it.

Up until that moment, I was primarily worried about the study. I was able leave those thoughts out of the ensemble space during our sessions. It was important to me be present in the experience. However, the days in between sessions were heavy, full of doubts and frustration. My hopes to come closer with the students and for the ensemble to reach a point of trust and togetherness were co-existing with my worries about failing at doing the study. I remember thinking that some of the circumstances, things like the inconsistent attendance and the student’s lack of engagement were delaying the study from taking off. I worried that time would just go by and that I wouldn’t even be able to look at what I wanted to look. I worried about the validity of my study.

As I reflect on the experience now, I feel fortunate to have had the experience I had. I wouldn’t change the struggles or the time it took for the ensemble to get to where it ultimately did. I kept reminding myself that there was a difference between a school setting and the study’s setting. In the school setting, it doesn’t matter how open ended is your instruction, if a student is enrolled in your class, they have to be there. A study like this one is more about asking, wondering, and most importantly, listening. As the cliché goes, “Actions speak louder than words.” The students were speaking to me in their own ways, it took some time, but I finally listened. It wasn’t about me or about an academic degree or about this paper or the professors I report to. It has always got to be about the students. Being an educator who sees himself as someone devoted to empowering students voices through creativity, I couldn’t help to wonder how much of the work we do is really about considering students’ voices and not about giving the students what we
think they need. This realization made me remember thoughts I had about my role as a researcher the first day of the study when I walked through my old neighborhood on the way to UpBeat: I felt like an intruder. At this moment, it was all coming together quite clearly. For the majority of time I have been asking things from the students, expecting to receive. It was about time for me to ask myself, “What was I offering to them?”
Chapter VI
A BREAKTHROUGH

_We have something. We start off with nothing, now we have something._
– Romeo

Our 9th session, on December 13, 2018, would be our last session of the semester before the winter holiday break. Originally, the study was scheduled to be done by this date, with around 15 sessions. This particular semester, UpBeat started later, and our first session was on October 11, 2018. I had already discussed with the administrators about coming back after the break to do the rest of the sessions. However, as I mentioned before, I felt the study needed to keep going for the whole semester.

Today was our last day for this semester. The students will be busy preparing for their concert next week which includes various presentations for most of them. Some of the students will play in the orchestra and also in the jazz ensemble and some will play solo pieces, so I won’t be able to see them until next semester. After talking to Randall recently, and after feeling like this for a while, I feel it is best to meet with the students for as long as I can. (13 Dec., 2018)

On my way to UpBeat I remembered being anxious and having mixed feelings. I felt good because the ensemble was in the best place it had ever been; a lot needed to happen still, but I could see progress, especially in the way we felt around each other. On the other hand, I was worried about the next semester. I knew there would be changes in the schedule and that it could negatively affect the study. The ensemble needed to have the same students. Continuing the study with a different group of students would take me back to the beginning and would defeat the purpose of going on for another semester. The closer I was getting to UpBeat the more I tried to focus on the session that was about
to happen because there was nothing I could do about next semester’s schedule at that point.

As I walked towards UpBeat, I remember saying to myself that I needed to shift my focus from things that worried me to things that could be worrying the students. For most of the study I had been primarily worrying about the technicalities of research. I understand the need to be meticulous with a project of this kind, but through reflection I concluded that perhaps I confused the needs of the students of UpBeat with the needs of students in general. How could this be? I asked myself. Everything I did in the classroom was meant to prioritize the needs of the students in the room. One of the mistakes I made could’ve been to believe that in order to fabricate a space of creativity in which the students are co-designers of their experiences, I needed to completely surrender my power and allow them to lead from the beginning. The ten minutes that usually take me to walk from the 3rd Ave, 149th Street station to UpBeat’s site went by in the blink of an eye as I kept reflecting on this idea. Now I was across the street from the church door looking at the students as they went in with their instruments. At this moment I thought how scary and confusing those first sessions must’ve been for the students.

When I got there, I learned that we would be in another room. We were moved to the other side from where we were, across the altar. The room was smaller, and it looked like a children’s classroom. There were six of us, so the size was not an issue. If anything, I’d say it was better. We could be closer to each other and it didn’t feel like a formal classroom. The room had one of those old school green chalkboards and to the right side of it, there was a box with colored chalks sitting in a little desk. The plan for
this session was to build on our last session in which we explored structure and tension with timbre and texture and to notate some of our ideas down. The students were talking amongst themselves, joking around as they would set up their instruments. I stood quietly for a moment, just looking at them and thinking. At that moment I decided I was going to do something completely different. I told the students to put their instruments down for a moment and I grabbed a chalk from the box and started writing on the board.

“This is how I do it.” Depending on what you will be working on you choose your working method. Sometimes inspiration comes when you least expect it. You might be walking on the park and a melody pops into your head, or a rhythmic motive. However, most of the time, inspiration finds you working. “I don’t always compose in this way, but it is a good starting point for me to show you how the compositional process can be.” I wrote down on the board a simple ii-V-I chord progression.

| Am   | D7   | G    | G    |

*Figure 1. Progression*

Doing this allowed us to have a discussion about what chords are. There were different levels of understanding in the group but having this conversation allowed the students to ask questions and clarify their doubts.

After discussing what constitutes a chord we were left with columns of notes in the board, each column represented one of the chords of the progression.
The need to translate the chord progression to the instrumentation we had in the ensemble gave us the opportunity to talk about orchestration. Orchestration is a vast subject, one that after many years writing for orchestra and other ensembles, I still struggle with. Having said that, I proceeded to explain some of the basic fundamentals of orchestration, starting by understanding our instruments. Our instrumentation was as follows: Clarinet in Bb, Trumpet in Bb, Violin, Viola and Cello. We discussed general aspects of the instruments like their frequency range and how they behave in different dynamics. We had two transposing instruments so that was another opportunity to talk about.

I was without a doubt giving a lecture, however, allowing spaces for students to share their own experiences and knowledge about different concepts that we were discussing. If necessary, I would jump in to support a student that was sharing their knowledge. For example, when we spoke about transposing instruments, I asked the group if they knew what this meant. Romeo and Marcela, being the ones who played a transposing instrument explained how transposing worked in their instruments and provided examples by playing a few notes. “When I play a written C, it sounds like a Bb, when I play a written G it sounds like an F.” Another student asked, “Yeah, but what is the point?” When they struggled to explain the “why” behind transposing instruments, it was my turn to jump in:

The reason we write in this way for these instruments is because each one of these instruments are grouped into families with others of various sizes. This system allows the musician to keep the same fingerings while switching between instruments of different sizes.
At that moment our ensemble space became a place of collaboration.

Not knowing what the outcome would be, today I led a class similar to what I do at the school that I teach. I walked them through one of the processes I use to compose. I explained them how I develop a chord progression (harmony). Then I explained how I translate that into a group of instruments (orchestration). I then assigned a line for each of the instruments in the room (Clarinet in Bb, Trumpet in Bb, Violin, Viola, Cello). This gave us the chance to talk about register and transposing instruments. (9 Dec., 2018)

My journal entry on December 13 was the longest one. As I share more excerpts of it throughout the chapter, I hope it captures those moments to be as special as I remember experiencing them.

After discussing the general characteristics of our instruments, like the frequency range and agility, it was time to assign notes to each instrument. The last two chords of our four-chord progression were the same so that meant that every instrument would be playing a melodic line of two or three notes in total depending on common notes from one chord to the other. I asked the students which instrument should do which notes and based on our conversation about frequency range, there was a general consensus that the cello should play the root of the chords. I assigned the parts for the rest of the instruments and we played the progression.

![Figure 3. Orchestration](image-url)
I noted this portion of the lesson in my journal:

I had them play through the progression. They started joking around and were like, “that sounds like music!” Like it was some kind of magic what had just happened. (9 Dec., 2018)

The students were surprised after we played through the chords. I imagine a few reasons that might validate my perceptions, but in all fairness I can only speculate. Maybe because the music played at that particular moment is similar to what they are used to performing, so I wondered if their surprise came from the familiarity they felt towards the tonal language of the music being played. We played a chord progression that is present in many compositions of the Western European music canon. I want to be careful to not make absolute claims, because I think it’s reasonable to say that the ii-V-I is the most common progression in Jazz. UpBeat has many ensembles, amongst them, a “traditional” orchestra and a Jazz Big Band.

All the students in the room have experience in both ensembles so it is fair to say that they have experienced these chord changes before, even if they couldn’t name or identify their harmonic relationships or why do they recognize these particular musical sounds as something familiar.

The thing is that I used traditional harmony and traditional orchestration methods and they know this stuff from the music they always practice and perform. So that was their door into this whole thing. Suddenly they believed in the power of their ensemble. (9 Dec., 2018)

Another reason I can think of to make sense of the students’ reactions comes from reflecting on what happened before we played the progression. Before formally studying music composition at the conservatory, most of my music education focused on identifying, deconstructing and explaining musical elements mostly from music scores and often from recordings. For example, an unusual rhythmic passage in a guitar piece
became an opportunity for my professor to help me understand the feel of a 6/8 time. Similarly, an unusual chord progression could help me understand different harmonic resources like secondary dominants or tritone substitutions.

Experiences like the ones I just described had a starting point on an already existing music composition, or aesthetic object. In our session, instead of reverse-engineering an object to reveal its design and/or the concepts that give it form, we used concepts (some of them already known by some of the students, and some of them newly understood) to create the object. Our object might not be comparable to others in terms of sophistication, technique and originality, but it’s ours. Again, I can only speculate, but perhaps the students’ surprise came from experiencing an aesthetic object in a new way. A way that emphasized process and helped demystify the object, but at the same helped understand its qualities.

Without the students’ past musical experiences and their years studying music it would’ve been very difficult to discuss with them how concepts like harmonic progression, orchestration, and others relate to our ensemble and the craft of music making. I didn’t teach them about something that was far or remote from their experiences, however I explicitly named some of the concepts that exist within the music they have experienced and engaged with throughout the years. I suspect that by showing them one of the ways I approach music when composing, maybe they understood that interpretation might not be the only way in which they can relate to a work of music; they can participate from the creative process that brings this aesthetic object to life.

Another effective way of transforming and evolving musical material in a composition is through rhythm. Without the need to notate anything, we tried playing the
same notes but with different rhythms. By doing this, our simple and pretty static chord progression started to sound different. When we did the matrix strategy, we used ostinatos even if we didn’t name them that way. At that time the word “loop” helped me get the idea across faster. During this particular session, I named the concept and proposed its use as another way to develop musical ideas.

Then I explained some of the strategies I use to give the music some movement, so we played the same notes changing some rhythms here and there (rhythmic development) and they felt how something simple can start to take shape in various ways. As a sub-category of rhythm I introduced the idea of ostinato and rhythmic motives, and we played around with that, same notes, different rhythms. (9 Dec., 2018)

In the session I explained, “Not all instruments need to play the ostinato, it can be a layer that provides stability and that allows for other kinds of simultaneous development on the other instruments.” I spoke about the economy of elements, something my own professor talked about all the time. I showed them examples of simple motives and how to transform them in a logical and sequential way. Later I suggested the cello play a rhythmic ostinato through the changes while the other instruments stayed the same as before.

*Figure 4. Orchestration with Ostinato*
We played around with this idea for a bit and tried using the same ostinato technique on other instruments. I was still leading the class. I would discuss a concept and we would try it out. I would answer questions that would lead us into trying other possibilities, however, I was in control. I could see the students were really engaging with what was happening, so I meant to ask them what they thought about what we had been discussing and doing. Maybe my way of asking was not clear (and now I am thankful for that) but the students understood something different.

I saw they were pretty engaged by now, so I asked, “What do you guys think?” I was asking like, what do you think about all of this? But they understood: What do you think we should do next? So, they started “What if you play this note? What if you play that note? What if you do this beat? What if you keep that note for a few bars? What if you play this melody? (9 Dec., 2018)

In a matter of seconds, I had the following mental conversation with myself:

- What is happening right now?
- I don’t know.
- What I meant to ask was what did they think about what we’ve been doing…
- Shut up…what’s wrong with you? … Just sit down and go with it!

It was like I ceased to exist. But not me, my teacher-self ceased to exist, in a good way. The students didn’t need the teacher anymore, they needed the time and the space to explore their creativity collectively, and once I took my teacher hat off, I was welcomed into the collaboration as much as anyone else.

At this time, I knew the job of my teacher-self was done and I had to change gears to that of a collaborator musician. I jumped in and gave my suggestions as well and we all came to an agreement of what to do next. (9 Dec., 2018)

We sketched and planned what we would do. I was not playing an instrument that day, however. Many times, I would take my viola to the sessions. I am not good at it but to have it during some sessions also helped to establish connections with the students who would help me with bowing and vibrato techniques sometimes. I don’t remember
why I didn’t bring it that day, but I remember carrying it on the train and on the street on some cold days and it was not great, so I would leave it on cold days. We decided that the strings would be playing an accompaniment of sorts and that the winds would be starting off with a simple melodic motive which they would transform as the music progressed.

![Figure 5. Melodic Motive](image)

The strings would be playing the same rhythmic ostinato that the cello played previously and had some notes to choose from.

![Figure 6. Strings Ostinato](image)

The cello would alternate between playing four bars of G and a four-bar chromatic descent starting on Bb.

![Figure 7. Cello Part](image)

From my journal:

I conducted the entrance and they started playing the sketch we had all figured out right before. I sat down and listened and I was overwhelmed at what they created. (9 Dec., 2018)
It didn’t take too long for the ensemble to put a plan together. The ii-V-I example I brought and used to explain other concepts was undoubtedly our starting point; however, we were able to work out something that sounded completely different from those original four bars. When it was time to try it out, I just gave them the entrance and conducted a few bars, then it wasn’t necessary anymore. This is what they created (See Appendix C).

The rhythmic pattern Isabel was playing on the Cello was all they needed. So once the cello came in, I stopped conducting.

![Figure 8. Cello Rhythm](image)

Camila and Rose had the same pattern and you could tell they were listening to each other and the rest of the ensemble. They adjusted their playing to blend in with the cello achieving a homogenous sound. Marcela and Romeo on the clarinet and the trumpet were constantly transforming their motives. They seemed to be together at times, and in conversation at others.

![Figure 9. Clarinet and Trumpet](image)

The strings reacted to the tension the winds were creating by adjusting their dynamics as needed adding great expression to the performance. For the most part I was quiet. You can hear me provide suggestions in real-time in the recording, or simply clapping to help
with time keeping, but I was mostly quiet. I remember being thrilled as I listened to what they were doing with what we had sketched with words. However, things started to sink in when we heard the playback.

I made a recording on the phone while they performed. When I played it back, everyone was impressed. The violist said, “We did that?!?” It sounded both like a question and a surprise and I recognized that feeling from my own earlier experiences listening to my first attempts at composing being performed by other students back at the conservatory. (9 Dec., 2018)

I didn’t react as a researcher or some kind of social scientist, at least not immediately. This moment was beyond literature reviews or theoretical frameworks. It was a moment to acknowledge collaboration, togetherness and truth, our truth, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

- We did that?!
- Yes, you did, yes, we did.

When our session came to an end, we said our goodbyes and I told them I was looking forward to their concert which happened the following week. Still in a space of amazement, I took the bus home. On the bus I kept trying to make sense of the experience. When I got home, after a while, I sat down to write in my journal. I have been sharing excerpts throughout the chapter that highlight the chronological account of what happened during our session. The following excerpt highlights my thoughts a few hours after the session.

Today was a very good day. Anyone watching would say we had our best day, but I think it would be unfair to judge it in isolation. Today would’ve never happened without the difficult and awkward days and without me desperately trying to make a connection with students’ day after day. To contextualize, today we created a musical episode through planning, discussing and improvising. Today, the composing ensemble was everything I had hoped it to be. Naturally, this moment came with the immediate need for self-reflection. What did I do as a (teacher/researcher/participant) that contributed to this episode? I was thinking
about this non-stop on the bus back home, and the short answer is: I did the opposite of what I thought was the correct approach. Lol

I started this study with the hypothesis that if I design a space in which students are given freedom and choice, then music and community would flourish. I still believe this, but today’s session proved my strategy wrong. I have been struggling with my teacher-self a lot during this study. I have been very self-conscious about how much direction I give the students and about how much should I design the experiences. Every time I ask for ideas on how to move things forward, I get no responses. I try to brainstorm with students about strategies, interests and starting points and I end up talking by myself. I have told myself that I need time to establish rapport, and even when that is true, the only times we have played music have been because I led an activity or an exercise. I have managed to have a student conduct the ensemble after I model something, and they are always asking me if they are doing it correctly. I always reply that there is no incorrect or correct way in our context, and that they can be free to conduct or make suggestions as they like because I don’t want to dictate what they should do. I mean, wasn’t that the whole point of the study? To see what happens when students have that chance?

Well, what a slap in the face today was! As happy as I am with what was accomplished, I am also struggling with feelings of inadequacy. I feel like I failed at the most fundamental thing about education. I never taught them how to do the thing I was asking them to do! It sounds really stupid but in trying to give them freedom I did not provide the appropriate guidance. I can keep writing and writing but I guess that my takeaway is this: In this moment, in this space, with these peers, they needed me to be their teacher first, they needed that direction. I can’t walk into the classroom and just say, “okay we will create together, and you have complete freedom about what we will do.” I realize now that the composing ensemble needs a preparation beyond playing an instrument and having played in an orchestra or other ensemble for some time. It needs a preparatory phase in which the students and the teacher get to know each other. Technical and strategic sessions are important since the students need to know their possibilities before they can develop original ideas, and they need to feel comfortable enough to expose their ideas in front of everyone as well.

In most ensembles they are told what to do most of the time and they are used to this, and they have told me this themselves, like it’s easy when the teacher says that they are out of tune or that the phrasing is wrong etc, etc. They just do what they’re told and keep going. They even said that having to come up with musical ideas on their own is “working” and maybe they don’t want to do that or just don’t know how to do it yet!! So, my mistake was to assume that they would welcome my “let’s do what you want to do” approach immediately. I believe that today was a great day to visualize the composing ensemble and its possibilities, but now I know that students need to adapt themselves and this involves time, patience and guidance. (9 Dec., 2018)
We had a great day indeed. I understand that some things can’t happen overnight. I was not expecting the ensemble to work immediately however, it took too long for us to get to what happened during this session. I realize that I failed to visualize how important a preparatory phase for the composing ensemble was. When conceptualizing the digital composing class for my middle schoolers in Harlem, the idea all along was for them to compose collaboratively. In the process of designing the class, there were many ways to go about it, but it was clear that the class needed to be two semesters long. The reason being that in order for the students to be prepared to make music with others in the way we would be doing it, they needed fundamental knowledge of various concepts. For example, they needed to know how the software and the hardware work. The software is a DAW (Digital Audio Workstation) and like every other software, there is a learning curve. Also, the students needed to learn about proper care for the gear we were using. During the first semester the students learn how to connect, disconnect and take care of materials such as midi controllers, cables, headphones, laptops. The first semester was devoted to equipping the students with the necessary tools to be successful in their collaborations. As I reflected about our session, at times I hoped I had taken a similar approach to that taken at my school.

I touched on this particular session in depth during the interviews. I asked the students what they thought about our session. Romeo beat me to it; he talked about our session before I asked him. He clearly noticed my shift in approach.

When you saw that we were lacking, you were like, “Okay, let’s put this in,” and showing us, like that last class that we had last semester. That last day was like, okay, we saw how you make a harmony or how you flip it around. Then, we use that as a guide to help us come up with a piece that we had created.
I wouldn’t say they were lacking because that sort of puts the responsibility solely on them. I first believed that I shifted gears during our session out of impulse. However, I realized this change had been slowly happening over the previous weeks until I finally understood I was asking for something, but I wasn’t really giving anything.

When I asked Romeo how he felt after the session he said, “It felt great. It was also a surprise of what we came up with just with the resources that we had.” This sentence didn’t stand out during the interview or I would’ve asked a clarifying question. Did he mean “previous knowledge about composing” = resources? If he did, then his answer illustrates in some way my deficiencies and also resonates with the main question I’ve been asking myself throughout the study: How much of a teacher I should be? After our session, at least for me, is clear that I should’ve been more of a teacher at times. Romeo said, “I’m like, Wow, we came up with this. This is great.” As he said that, I relived the moment when we listened to the playback and the students were surprised at what they had created. However, something about what he said right before that stayed with me until now: “It was showing everyone has some type of creativity.” The way Romeo said it made me wonder if he said that because he truly believes that everyone can be creative or if he was just surprised because until then he thought that music composing was not for everyone.

When I went to music school, to be a composer in a way meant that you had something all other musicians didn’t have. Many of my close friends would tell me in conversations that they felt they would in all certainty fail if they were to attempt composing. They had never attempted to do so, however, the unspoken “truth” in the conservatory was that the composer was at the top of the food chain and nobody really
questioned that. Still, the backbone of my education while I was there was being able to sit down with those same friends and ask them about their instruments, watch and hear them perform, run my sketches by them, write for them and seek out their feedback for every piece I was working on. Like in the public music education space, there was no space for musicians to explore and to engage with music composing.

Despite thinking that the students were not paying attention to me at that time, Isabel noticed the moment I changed roles after having acted as a lecturer for a while.

I just remember it being a couple of people that took over since you stopped and then we all followed them. And either some people did their own thing with what they gave us or we just listened to the people. Camila was one of them and Romeo, they were like, and sometimes it was Rose, they’d take the lead and assign notes. And then if somebody didn’t like it, then we’d change it, but keep a rhythm or have some similar ideas.

Isabel’s account, although not descriptive of her own feelings, aligns with what I witnessed. If we take Isabel’s words at face value, it almost sounds as if what happened felt casual. The truth is that they did work out things casually. By casual I mean that when they were working things out and a suggestion wasn’t working, they would move on to find something that did. A recurring problem with my students in Harlem is experiencing feelings of exclusion when the ideas they individually suggest are not accepted or need to be modified to work in the project. The composing ensemble didn’t seem to have that problem on this particular session. Sharing and suggesting changes was a way to find possibilities to solve a collective problem, not to promote individual ideas.

Marcela compared the experience to what she feels when improvising which was surprising because previously, she had compared improvising to “work.” This time around however, from my perspective she was referring to the experience in a positive
tone. There was a lot improvising on our session indeed. The music I transcribed came from them improvising, however, with a clear strategy carefully put together in collaboration:

It felt kind of like soloing. When they tell you the solo and they give you notes, or they give you a rhythm. Then you improvise on that rhythm. It felt like soloing when we did that. It felt like improv because none of us knew what we were playing. We were just playing the rhythm that we thought of together, or like the things we made for each other. It was not like it was set on paper, that’s what we played.

I disagree a little with Marcela. I do believe they knew what they were playing, not note for note, but as she says, they were playing the music they thought of together and made for one another. Her comment about the music not being set in paper made me wonder about the way we teach the value of a music composition. Is it defined by its completion or documentation, is it defined by its process?

Camila, one of the first students that took lead that day, surprised me with her answer.

**Yan:** The last day that we were in that little room upstairs, we created something, and I transcribed that. I want to know how was that for you? How did you feel in that moment?

**Camila:** I don’t think I was there.

**Yan:** Yes, you were.

**Camila:** I was?

**Yan:** You were playing the violin, and Isabel was playing your cello, and Marcela clarinet, and Romeo trumpet, and Rose was playing the viola…

**Camila:** [silence]

**Yan:** Come on.

**Camila:** [silence]
Yan: It was the last day before the concert.

Camila: [silence]

Yan: If you don’t remember that’s fine.

Haha! I was speechless. How could she forget that day? I decided to move on thinking that the memory of it would come back at some point.

Rose said she felt impressed with the music made by the ensemble.

It made me feel really strong, impressed. I feel like we could do so much more if we’re able to come up with that in a few minutes, then I’m like what else can we do? All we have to do is write it down so that we can remember.

Romeo also thought about future possibilities: “Then, I also thought, Oh, we’re moving forward because now we have something. We start off with nothing, now we have something that we could work with.” Rose and Romeo’s comments made me feel like they had been waiting for something to happen and now that it had, they were eager to keep going and to see where it would go.

Rose also said,

That’s what I feel like when I said earlier about the unity of the classmates and us knowing each other. We get comfortable with each other and our music is just really good. It just felt like something; it’s like listening to it again I couldn’t believe that I was listening to something we did. It was like I was listening to a recording but that’s really us. I know I keep saying that.

It seemed like for Rose, a necessary ingredient for the ensemble to work out was developing that closeness. When I asked her how she thought the ensemble got to the point it did during our session she confirmed some of what I had perceived.

The first days, like you said in the beginning it was awkward. But in those days that we spoke more than we played, it was our time to get comfortable with each other. Then usually those times it was the five of us talking. That’s what I meant by we had to get comfortable with each other and then the music came out good.

When asked the same thing, Romeo said:
It was focus. When all the kids were there, the ones that didn’t want to be there mixed with the ones that want to be there, the ones that wasn’t paying attention with the ones that were paying attention, it’s like everything’s all around. We got some paying attention, some is not, opposed to when you take all the distractions and you have only the one that’s focusing. Okay, now we could build out from here.” I can understand Romeo’s posture however, I still remain critical about my responsibility in the fact that students dropped out from the study.

Later he said,

Then, by you going from friend to teacher, that also helped us. […] I don’t really know everything to be like, Okay, this is what I’m going to make the melody or the harmony. Now, I’m still having a little trouble with it. I’m still learning of how you do it, but at least we have something the teacher gave us, Okay, this is what’s right. This is what we could abide by or look at to help us build up from there.

I agree completely with him. My teacher-self was needed more than I anticipated, and it took me a while to understand it.

Isabel spoke about the class’s size: “Honestly, I think it’s because there was less people.” I agree with Isabel. When I designed the study, I settled on 15 to be the maximum number of students in the ensemble. The reason being that for years I have taught classes of 25 students and sometimes more students. In my personal experience, I have found that in smaller groups there is more time to carry out projects. I thought that keeping the ensemble to a maximum of 15 students in the ensemble would help with making the group come together and honestly, that it would be easier. For our composing ensemble, 15 students were a little too much:

When it was more people it was more awkward, because personally, in our orchestra the winds and the strings are segregated a little bit, before. Now we talk to each other, but before, when this class started, we didn’t really talk to winds. So, it was awkward. So, when there were less people, we were all friends, so it was better to talk to them and create ideas and bounce off of each other.

Most of the work I was doing when I started studying composition was done in isolation. And as portrayed in the prelude of this dissertation it kept me from socializing
with other musicians who were in a similar journey. Not having instrumentalists around, me with whom I could bounce ideas off, was preventing me from having a broader perspective about the creation of music other than the one I found in textbooks and music scores.

When Isabel, a string player, talked about segregation in the orchestra I was not surprised. In a large ensemble that has a fixed repertoire you don’t have to talk to anyone other than maybe your stand partner. Also, opportunities to share musically with musicians of other instrumental families may not occur often. This is not a critique of the large ensemble as much as it is an argument for the smaller composing ensemble and the opportunities it could bring to all musicians.

When I started the study, I envisioned the composing ensemble to be a space between the general music classroom and the large ensemble. A place that could combine the creativity of the general music classroom and the refinement and polishing of music that happens in the large ensemble. After doing the study and sharing time with the students I am confident that the composing ensemble has many possibilities.

To listen to Rose say she felt strong tells me that the ensemble can be a space of empowerment for our youth. To have witnessed Camila taking over during the session confirms Rose’s feeling and tells me that it is also a space for leadership. To have also experienced how the students collaborated and negotiated their ideas in a positive way speaks to me about empathy and collaboration. Marcela’s (who had previously called work anything that was not teacher-directed) willingness to participate from compositional and improvisatory collective work showed me how the ensemble can help students demystify and engage with musical activities they don’t feel confident doing so
with. Romeo’s surprise and realization about everybody’s creative potential showed me how the ensemble can be a space in which students realize and take ownership of their creative powers. To hear Isabel say how after our class students from different instrumental families are talking to each other tells me that the composing ensemble can also abolish musician segregation by creating a space for togetherness.
Chapter VII

COLONIZED … ER?

I am a walking contradiction with a foot in both worlds — in the dominant privileged institutions and in the marginalized communities.

— Sofia Villenas

I could’ve ended the dissertation with the previous chapter. During this chapter I would be wrapping things up, addressing the research questions, maybe doing a brief summary and trying to settle on a conclusion that could hopefully be useful to the music education community. After all, so far, I have discussed the journey the composing ensemble went through as honestly as I could. I spoke about my mistakes; my doubts and feelings of inadequacy and I tried my best to engage with the students’ voices without interpreting or editing their comments to make the study look successful. In spite of the struggles, there was a positive breakthrough, an episode in which some of the positive things I theorized could result from the composing ensemble actually happened. So far it fits a narrative I have often times encountered in some other research: there is a problem, a proposed solution to the problem that is tested out over a period of time, and a positive outcome that reinforces the validity of the proposed solution. I believe that I could make my study fit that narrative if I report nothing more and decide to focus all the findings of the study on the musical breakthrough the ensemble had and that I discussed on the previous chapter.

However, in this study’s particular case, as time went on, other concerns emerged. These concerns drastically changed my views on research and my own positionality. It
was painful to realize that even when I was conducting research in a community, I felt
was my own, I was an outsider, a kind of colonizer. As Tuhiwai (1999) points out,
“Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and
colonialism is both regulated and realized” (p. 8). It is clear to me now; I was seen as
two people. My hispanic-ness granted me relatability, but my ethnographic presence was
resisted. Throughout the study I was constantly dealing with this multiplicity of being
and as the study progressed, I became more aware of it. Today, as I look back, I have to
say I celebrate the resistance I met when I had my researcher hat on. It was difficult to
understand that such resistance was not directed at my person but perhaps at the idea of
being examined, studied, observed and even defined.

In this chapter I will expand on these concerns through my own ethnographic
experience. I will also discuss the difficulties we had to come back to a breakthrough
like the one discussed in the previous chapter after we had it. I will examine a critical
incident that happened while attempting to interview one of the students. This incident
was the seed of my current positionality perspectives, a defining moment in my career as
an educator and a life-changing moment as a Latinx person.

**Taking a Break**

After the composing ensemble’s last session on December 2018 I was having
mixed feelings. On one side I felt relieved and assured that there was actually potential
to the idea of a “composing ensemble.” I spent some time looking at my notes, reading
my journal, really trying to take in the experience of the whole semester. It had started
late, we had a few days in which the snow kept some students from showing up,
attendance dropped significantly, and it took a considerable amount of time to establish
good rapport and collective trust. I let myself dwell for some time on my mistakes trying to see the bigger picture. At some point I decided to think that naming circumstances that delay our plans or projections can be a futile exercise. “Something” will always happen. A field trip, a change of room, misplaced computer, or a school wide assembly right at the time of your class. I believe that trying to have perfect and ideal conditions constantly during a study can be dangerous to its trustworthiness or could result in an artificial and improbable scenario that is removed from the realities other teachers and myself experience with our students in our schools. This thought helped me be more objective as I reflected about the work that had been done so far. I felt relieved because in spite of whatever circumstances or situations, we had grown as an ensemble and I was finding a space within the community that already existed at UpBeat.

On the other hand, I was very anxious. I was about to begin the winter holiday break and I felt that things with the ensemble would get cold. UpBeat would start at the end of January and I would be teaching in China for their first two weeks. At the time I thought that having all that time off would be devastating for the ensemble in its best moment. Another attenuating factor was UpBeat’s changing schedule. Both Liza and Rich were aware of the importance of keeping the same students together for the remainder of the study. At some point during the break, I received an email from Liza with updates. Most of the student’s schedules had changed and I was no longer going to meet at the previous time because of UpBeat’s schedule that semester but they were making an effort to accommodate me in a way that would allow to continue the study. I have no idea how they did it, between coordinating and preparing for their new semester, and reaching out to the students and their parents and who knows what else to find a
common time in which all the students of the ensemble could meet. Thankfully, before my return to UpBeat everything was settled and organized. As I mentioned earlier, the time of our sessions changed, but I was going to officially work with the same five students that I was working before which was the most important thing.

As soon as the logistics were settled, I resumed my reflection with the idea of transitioning into planning. One day, as I looked at the transcription of the music created by the ensemble, I asked myself: how can we move on? Later during the interviews Romeo revealed that after that last session we had on December 2018 he had similar concerns. “Then, the other thing was how to move on from this. We just have this. Okay, there’s a lot of avenues we could go from here. Where do we start?” I read that now and I think: Start? That sounds like going backwards, or in circles. We started months before that experience! However, looking back, I agree with Romeo’s thinking: to move on and to continue is to constantly start something new.

The score, included in the previous chapter, is not a representation of our multidimensional experience, but it does represent something. Outside of music it represents a joint effort, a creative collaboration. For those of us involved in its making, it is a unique aesthetic object that resulted from a unique process. Unique in the way it was particular and contextual to us, not unique as in rare or in category, or as opposed to other aesthetic objects or processes. Musically it represents or shows the place where the ensemble stands as a whole. As I discussed in the previous chapter, when I transcribed the recording of the performance, we had on our December 9th session, I was surprised with how the students developed their musical ideas. From a music composing technical standpoint, the musical choices of the students during the planning and performing of the
piece were consistent and coherent, even if the students couldn’t identify it themselves. It would be reasonable to think that since they had been exposed to these techniques for a long time in their instrumental lessons and in their ensembles that those experiences might have helped them in the composing ensemble.

It is not the first time I see students scaffold their understandings across musical contexts. For example, I wrote about one of my students as a part of a case study I contributed for a chapter, in which Dr. Nancy Streim (2019) is the main author, and that is included in a book called *Integrating Digital Technology in Education* edited by R. Martin Reardon and Jack Leonard. My sixth-grade student, who is a cellist in the orchestra, used a combination of original and sampled orchestral music to create a texture that achieved a dramatic effect in [a] police motorcycle chase scene. She represented the changes in mood and movement using a musical form as she understood it through her experiences in orchestra. (Streim et. al, 2019, p. 120)

I believe that the students in the composing ensemble were also applying their previous musical experiences to the new challenges they were facing in the composing ensemble. My student in the film scoring class, probably would not verbalize her compositional thoughts as I have, but I could recognize clear and conscious techniques in the choices she made and she had no trouble expressing them with the technological tools available to her. (p. 120)

In the composing ensemble I recognized similar characteristics.

In order to move forward I had to re-asses my strategies. Teacher action research is a non-linear kind of research in which practitioners “need to show that certain changes took place as they changed practices, documenting their relationship to the setting, and how different relationships in the setting evolved” (Yorks, 2005, p. 396). In accordance to that idea, during the break I took some time to examine where we stood as an
ensemble. As I discussed in the previous paragraphs, I considered two main qualities or realities that could help me understand the culture of our ensemble at that specific time. These qualities or realities were our social characteristics and our musical characteristics, or as referred to before, our experiences outside and within music.

Concerned with time, with the experience of the previous sessions and the understanding that moving forward I needed to be more of a teacher, I designed a number of strategies that I felt would be successful for our ensemble. I would divide the ensemble’s time in two parts. In one of the parts we would continue developing our piece. That meant that through conversation, discussion and testing we would analyze it, revise it and add to it. This portion of the session was meant to cultivate and solidify our collaboration. I planned to use the other portion of the sessions to discuss some compositional techniques. The idea was to have the students discover or understand a compositional technique in a way that could give us a starting point to come up with new material. During this portion I would bring some examples and material to show in the session, to discuss and to engage with. Table 2 shows an example of one of my plans.

My lesson planning in general, sometimes strictly and sometimes loosely, is based on Allsup’s framework and structuring device for open music classrooms which goes as follows:

- An investigation (an encounter) begins with a meaningful idea or musical text containing problems that are relevant to participants (or problems in which relevance emerges), organized toward purposeful long-term or short-term growth.
- Through dialogue, something new gets known, something ordinary is seen or heard anew, and imagination is sparked through inquiry.
- The environment fosters exploration: Musical and verbal brainstorming takes place. The teacher provokes new thinking, just as students provoke new thinking. Divergent musical and verbal responses are appreciated.
- A challenge is arrived at. (Limits are negotiated.)
- Students respond—first, by *experimenting* and rehearsing and, then, by *performing* and sharing.
- Assessment takes place through group and self-reflection.
- A new problem is looked for that builds on prior knowledge.
- The process renews itself. (Allsup, 2016, p. 95)

To structure, design and plan lessons using Allsup’s model has helped me to find a balance between structure and openness. In the context of the composing ensemble, even when there is space for discussion and group work, I would be leading that portion of the session, providing the students with technical knowledge with the aim that students would acquire new tools that they needed to be successful in our ensemble. Also, I designed these portions of the sessions not only so that the students expand their toolset, but also as an experience that has an easy entry point but the music that is created can be of great quality. Being uncertain about the attendance during the remaining sessions of the study these portions of the sessions could also work without the need of continuity. By that I mean that if attendance were to be weak and I suddenly got all the students, these strategies would still be successful.

I must admit that despite the fragility of the situation, before going back to UpBeat I was feeling very optimistic. Or maybe I should say, I was ignoring any negative feelings or fears regarding the upcoming sessions. I wanted us as an ensemble to keep riding the wave we got on our last session before the break and even when I prepared myself for working full throttle, I also prepared myself for less than ideal circumstances due to the changes in the schedule.

**Coming Back**

The day I got back to UpBeat I was informed the ensemble would be meeting in the room I met the students the very first day I was at UpBeat. Being in that room
brought me exciting memories about the beginnings of the study. I had my music score notebook with the transcription of the music we made on the previous session, I had my computer to be able to listen to it with the students and I got parts printed out for everyone. I also had a bunch of pencils to take notes and make edits. However, at 4pm only Isabel showed up. Making the best out of the situation, we listened to the music while looking at the score. I tried to have a discussion about the music, but she wasn’t very responsive and since she was the only one there that day we finished early.

The next few weeks were very difficult. I would mostly see Isabel, Rose and Romeo and maybe I saw Marcela twice. I never saw Camila again, but I was sort of expecting that. Our new scheduled time for the sessions was Tuesdays at 4:00 pm and Camila’s school ended at 3:30 pm in Manhattan. Commuting back into the Bronx at that time is extremely difficult so I was expecting it. Not only Camila, but the rest of the students in the ensemble also had many things going on for them and had very little time to get to UpBeat at the time that the comping ensemble started.

One of the days that Marcela showed up, we read the piece. She had a saxophone instead of her Clarinet and as a group we felt that it sounded very good with that change in timbre. We read the piece a few times and discussed it. Romeo suggested a few changes to his part, and we tried them out. For a moment we were in flow, just like on the session on December 9. We were dissecting the music, trying out other things, revising and testing them out. Then, something very interesting happened. Isabel, who most of time throughout the whole study remained quiet said something. Later during the interview, I asked her about it. What follows is an excerpt from the interview:

**Yan:** I don’t know if you remember this, but I remember that you were paying attention, and you started talking, you started saying, “Oh maybe you should …”
And as soon as everybody looked at you to listen, you just said, “Okay, no.” And I was so curious to hear your input, and what was going to be your idea, and I feel that other people in the classroom were also. I saw that you were really done talking so I didn’t ask you to keep going. If you can recall that moment, can you talk a little bit about that?

Isabel: I don’t really remember, but I feel like it was probably because, probably, English. It was probably because either, I just forgot what I was going to say or somebody had a similar idea, so I didn’t want to say it, reiterate, because it’s redundant. Or, yeah that’s usually it, was that when we had a lot of people? Because if not, I probably would have talked.

I have also kept myself from participating in a class or group because of English. The truth is that after a long day when I am tired from work my English skills drop significantly. My accent is stronger, and my brain just doesn’t make the right connections. Often times I have accidentally started a phrase in Spanish with English speakers. It just happens. I couldn’t say that Isabel refers to the same thing, but I am familiar with the feeling of just existing in a space without verbally engaging with what is happening because of language. Another factor that has also made me kept to myself is the amount of people in the room. Throughout the study I kept wanting her to share her thoughts more, but her answer reminded me of my own teenage years and how terrifying can be to be in a big group of people.

Looking back, it was one of the most productive sessions we had after the winter holiday break. At the time I didn’t think it was because I was frustrated with attendance and even when I felt great that we were able to work on our music again, the thought that several weeks had passed without significant activity had me feeling like we were behind and unable to catch up. Sadly, the following weeks would just add to my frustration. Romeo and Rose were always around and ready to work but they were also busy with many other things. Rose specifically had upcoming auditions and was very devoted to
them and other performances that were coming up. More than one time I told her that it was okay for her to leave and practice because not enough people would show up to the sessions.

Soon after I noticed she started to make that assessment on her own. She would arrive at UpBeat and come to the classroom or take a look at the situation and make a judgment call about whether it was going to happen or not that day. I remember feeling scared because I didn’t want her to lose her interest in our ensemble. She had been incredibly generous and reliable since day one. She was not afraid to try things out even if they were unknown and scary to her. I felt she was beginning to feel disappointed and to feel that was unbearable. I would be sitting in the classroom by myself waiting for the students and she would walk by and say hello. She would look around and would tell me she needed to practice and off she went. I was okay with it, but also heartbroken with the thought that she was disappointed in what was happening.

Isabel was always there, but I noticed she started hiding and avoiding me. I don’t think she was avoiding me as a person, but it was clear that she didn’t want to be the only one in the classroom if she was the only person from the ensemble there any particular day. Sometimes she would not come to the session even if Rose and Romeo were in the room. The administrator (not Richard or Liza) would tell me, “Isabel is here, do you want me to go get her?” Every time I told him it was not necessary. Sometimes I was by myself, but she knew we were there. I didn’t feel like chasing students around and sort of forcing them to come to the session was in alignment with what the composing ensemble had become.
On the session of April 2, everyone but Camila showed up again and I jumped right into my strategies. We worked on our original music and we explored serial music. I believed that the success we had on December 9 was in part due to my decision to be more of a teacher, therefore I was being critical of my pedagogical approach at all times.

Today, it was actually good because I had four out of the five students that remain in the study. I did a strategy with the students exploring serial music. A violin professor joined. That made me feel a little uncomfortable at first because I felt like I was being judged. But I embraced it and he made music with us. (2 April, 2019)

The feeling of being judged in my classes is not new. At my school, especially after such a long time I don’t feel that way anymore. I am lucky to have the support of the administrators and the parents who believe in what the music team does every day. However, at the beginning I did feel the pressure to deliver.

When a visitor or administrator enters your classroom, they do so at a point in time that is part of a long line and process. My classrooms at times look messy and loud and that is okay with me, but how do you explain that to an administrator, or an outsider observing teacher whose concept of efficiency and progress is silence, quick transitions, absolute order…? I am generalizing, and to do so is probably not fair, however, it is a thought that is constantly there and as hired professionals it is important to feel secure in your position. Even after teaching the way I do for a long time; I still got that uneasy feeling when the violin teacher sat on our session. I had not spoken to him before, and I never after, so I don’t know how he felt, but after my initial reaction I decided to take his presence as support to our ensemble and today I can say with certainty that having him there made our session better. I wrote the following on my field notes:
I explained a bit of the serial music background, we chose a few notes and made
up a series and we went for it. We did do music and it was successful.
(2 April, 2019)

Our music making that day was indeed successful. But it was because of the setup. The
lesson plan for this class was almost identical to the lesson plan I included previously and
that is similar to the lesson plans I do for my middle schoolers. Seeing how this approach
was the one that allowed for better experiences to happen was both an affirmation on
years of teaching but also an uncomfortable moment as a researcher in this context and
got me wondering how thing would’ve been had I done that from the beginning.

In the composing ensemble context, it is obvious at this point that there needs to
be a preparation and set up phase. And that might last a whole semester, just like
I do with my kids at the school LOL. I think that’s also something that makes me
self-conscious, because the game plan I am more and more convinced is needed
for an ensemble like this one is the plan I already put together and executed for
several years in my school. (2 April, 2019)

Throughout the process of the study, and through the process of writing the story of what
happened, there were and still are moments of great self-doubt. Am I doing the right
thing? Is this worth it? What did I get myself into? Questions like these and other have
been part of my process, and of the processes of many dear friends along the same path.
The day after the session I described above, I came back to the journal and added the
following, which I will divide in pieces to add some commentary:

Yesterday I finally got some more kids. I got everyone but Camila. I haven’t
seen Camila ever since we got back. The last few weeks have been a hit or miss.
We did read our transcription from last semester, but I mostly get Romeo, Rose,
and Isabel. Marcela has come maybe once before. I have been stressing out
about many things. Like will the study be worth it? What is happening? It almost
feels like the original idea is beside the point now. It’s more about how we can
make our community survive. Our accomplishments, or what I thought we would
accomplish is out the window now for sure. We haven’t been able to get the
group together in its entirety. (2 April, 2019)
I struggled with the decision of adding this excerpt or not. A narrative that I am used to seeing in some of the research that I have read is that moments of failure, mistakes, self-doubt and frustration, even when we all know are part of the work, are not displayed crude and raw so that everyone on the same journey can see.

The pressure many of us have to be successful, to have an impact on the field and to have relevant ideas can interfere with allowing ourselves to be vulnerable amidst the chaos. My journey is not harder or more important than anyone else’s, and I am not trying to criticize the ways other researchers deal with their own processes, but I believe that taking the time to really sit with my emotions, whatever they were, was fundamental to me in finding moments of illumination. To exist within the tension, I feel even as I write these words has allowed me to be honest with myself and to be able to really see what was happening in front of me.

The administration made everything they could, so I get the same kids together, but it hasn’t been the case. I didn’t even journal the last few weeks maybe because of fear to face something I don’t know how to face. Like will my professors think it’s okay? It is true that in other circumstances, with everyone here, more would’ve happened. However, I guess this is real? (2 April, 2019) I was lucky to not be working with an indifferent administration during the study. Even with their crazy schedule and already hard job of keeping an art non-profit afloat, Liza and Rich were genuinely helpful and made sure I felt they were supporting me. Their on-site administrator was incredible to me and solved every logistical problem I had during my sessions. He knew the program and its resources well and was able to make judgment calls on his own that were vital to the work of the ensemble.

However, even with all of their influence and work, the attendance was far from good, making me nervous as time went by. I struggled with the so-called “validity” of
the study many times and with the fact that we got the ensemble to a good place. I would lie if I didn’t say I had high expectations for the ensemble to just take off and keep transforming and growing but it wasn’t happening, and I was disappointed. However, my disappointment was shifting focus. I was simultaneously worried about the future and the trustworthiness or relevance of the study, but my disappointment was no longer about that, it was about the idea of the ensemble and my work as a teacher/researcher falling short to the student’s expectations.

It’s a bit disappointment to see where we got a few weeks ago and now this seems to be crumbling down. Something has changed in me though. I’m starting to worry more and more about what will the students get out of this and less about the study. Balancing these two things is hard because I want to be focused and I don’t want to miss anything, so I try to be hyper-aware of everything. I invest myself double, as a researcher and as a teacher, and often times as whatever the students need me to be at that moment, even if it has nothing to do with the composing ensemble. When I get home, I’m dead. Pretty tired. The ride home on the bus can be brutal because I am over analyzing everything. On one hand I’m thinking: this was not the plan, and in the other I’m thinking, fuck it, there is something going on here and I don’t wanna miss it. (2 April, 2019)

This shift was not sudden. It started happening the previous semester. I started asking myself: What is this research doing for the students? How will they benefit from all of these activities? Tuhiwai (1999) talks about major issues with research. She summarizes these issues with critical questions that are often asked by communities and indigenous activists:

Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interest does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? (p. 10)

These and other concerns regarding my role as a researcher started shaping a new lens through which I started looking at everything concerning my work at UpBeat. Towards the end of the study, and as seen on the previous journal excerpt, something was
changing within me. It is not that I gave up on the study; I clearly didn’t, but I expanded from caring *about* the students to also caring *for* the students. Gay (2018) expands on the difference:

Culturally responsive caring as an essential part of the educational process focuses on caring *for* instead of caring *about* the personal well-being and academic success of ethnically diverse students, with the clear understanding that the two are interrelated. While caring *about* conveys feelings for one’s state of being, caring *for* is active engagement in doing something to positively affect it. Thus, it encompasses a combination of concern, commitment, responsibility and action. (p. 58)

To understand the difference Gay makes between caring *about* and caring *for* is to exercise a form of deep self-reflection. During my first few years of teaching I was convinced that I cared *for* my students. I was wrong. It took me many years of hard work to become more aware of what it means to be a pedagogue that cares *for* (his) students. I am certainly not there yet. The work that needs to be done is never over and at best, we are underway.

On April 30 I had a conversation with Romeo that helped me visualize things differently. He was the only person that came to the session that day and in spite of that, he decided to stay and have a conversation with me. Throughout the study, there was more than one occasion that Romeo’s perspective helped my process as a teacher/researcher. His generosity moved me deeply and still does when I read the data I gather from brainstorming sessions, interviews and my journal. After talking to him that day I wrote the following in my journal:

Today I spoke to Romeo for quite some time. He is so generous, so generous! He is always present, and he is always willing to take a step forward even if it makes him vulnerable. I don’t know if he would put it in those words but that is my impression. In our conversation he talked about the fear of being wrong and how that might’ve held the group back in the past. Also, the lack of orchestration
knowledge and technique in general seems to be a factor for him. It was a very good conversation. I let him go after half an hour or so and just took off.

Nobody else was there, but today, after talking to him I feel like even when I’ve been thinking that not enough was done in the past weeks and the study in general to have something to talk about, the way he talks about the experience tells me otherwise and it’s illuminating for me in so many ways. It’s almost like the acknowledgement and the certainty that they did go through all of it consciously and they did have an experience that I can’t personally grasp for many different reasons. Maybe because of my positionality and my expectations and just my years of working with composing in all its shapes and variations. I realize that this was so remote from their experiences that they do have a well-formed opinion about what happened throughout the study and that they are critical about the experience. I feel good today because just casually talking to him so many important things came to light. Let’s see what happens next. (30 April, 2019)

I think it’s safe to say, at least in my experience, that I have learned more from my students than I have reading any book or attending any class. Romeo’s words that day were both comforting and a reminder. His words made me think that perhaps they did see the composing ensemble as something that affected their lives one way or another and that they had an opinion about it. It made me think that my concerns with not having too much material to work on were wrong. It reminded me how out of touch we can become with the feeling and the state of being a beginner at something.

To work on a craft for many years can erase the memory of the struggles and the difficult times endured to get to a certain place. I couldn’t see the magnitude of the experience from their perspective because even when I included myself in the breakthroughs we had as an ensemble, they were having collective and individual breakthroughs simultaneously. The many years of experience I have composing by myself and others prevented me from having the experience they did since for most of them this was their first experience with composing in general. It also reminded me that our students are more present in the experiences than we believe them to be and with that
thought comes great responsibility. After talking to Romeo that day, I decided it was
time to start interviewing the students.

**It Comes Down To…More Work Needs To Be Done**

After I had that conversation with Romeo, I sensed that our experiences so far
were enough to yield significant data. Also, the way the attendance had been lately
prompted me to review and revise my interview protocols so that I could move quickly
onto that phase. Originally, I would schedule a day of interviews in which I would cite
all the students and I would interview them one by one the same day. Then I would cite
them again for another day to do focus groups. It had been so difficult to have them
come to a session that I felt I had to re-think my strategy for collecting data. I feared I
wouldn’t be able to unite all the students outside of UpBeat’s calendar. The truth is that I
hadn’t been able to get all of them together on any of our spring sessions, so I knew that
focus groups were out of the question. I decided to float around for the next weeks and
just play it by ear. (Long story short: I started the interview process on May 14 and the
last interview was on June 14 during the after-concert-end-of-semester party at UpBeat.)

On May 14, I went to UpBeat with the intention to interview Isabel since she was
always there. I would interview her for 30 or 45 minutes and that would be it. On the
way there I had a strange feeling. At the moment I wasn’t sure if I felt uneasy because of
the possibility that Isabel wouldn’t be there or if it was something else. As I walked from
the train station to UpBeat I felt similar to the way I felt the first day of the study as I
walked through the same exact place. A mix of emotions! One part of me was excited to
engage in conversation with the students, to learn their thoughts, to learn about their
perspectives, their opinions, good, bad and everything in between. Another part of me also felt as an intruder, an outsider, a colonizer in my own land, mining for knowledge.

This is not new, and I am not the only researcher who is part of a minoritized group that feels and is affected by the contradictions and the tensions that exist in what constitutes the vast realm of ethnographic research. For this reason, I claim my hispanic-ness and my puertorrican-ness as a badge of honor and as a calling to anti-colonial work. I write this dissertation using my own voice, carrying my accent through the writing, refusing to edit my voice to sound or to be read as a white person. And as I reflect on how my resistance and complicity co-exist, I find myself at the intersection of the academia, minoritized and indigenous communities, and the colonization, appropriation and exploitation of knowledge. I question whether or not I have a say in it, or if I can influence anything. Can I be instrumental in the efforts to decolonize research or am I just a pawn for the academy? Almost 25 years ago, when I was ten years old, a fellow Latinx scholar was already struggling with these concerns. I want to share and discuss an excerpt of one of her writings. It is lengthy as it is brilliant in summarizing the struggle of the “colonized colonizer”:

Here is my own dilemma: as a Chicana graduate student in a White institution and an educational ethnographer of Latino communities, I am both, as well as in between the two. I am the colonized in relation to the greater society, to the institution of higher learning, and to the dominant majority culture in the research setting. I am the colonizer because I am the educated “marginalized” researcher, recruited and sanctioned by privileged dominant institutions to write for and about Latino communities. I am a walking contradiction with a foot in both worlds — in the dominant privileged institutions and in the marginalized communities. Yet, I possess my own agency and will to promote my own and the collective agendas of particular Latino communities.

I did not even consider the multiplicity of self and identity and the nuances of what such consideration meant until I had to confront my own marginality as a Chicana researcher in relation to the dominant majority culture in the research setting. In the research context of power and domination, I encountered what it
means to examine closely within myself the intersectedness of race, class, gender, and other conceptual notions of identity. (Villenas, 1996, p. 714)

As a Puerto Rican, colonialism is part of my identity. Never, in the time I have been alive, have I lived outside the condition of being colonized. It started with the colonization and genocide of my ancestors by Spain and subsequently continued with the invasion and military occupation by the USA that began in 1898 and remains to this very day. Growing up, it shaped my perception of the world and the relationship between countries. Words and concepts like borders, nation, territory, constitution, nationalism, freedom, war, revolution, law, independence, terrorism, self-determination, patriotism, etc., for me carry a different meaning than the meaning it carries for a person from a sovereign country.

United States in Puerto Rico not only attacked our culture and our economy but also has used its law apparatus to legitimize colonial action thus de-legitimizing counter-hegemonic and anti-colonial movements. Atiles-Osoria (2012) elaborates:

Law and legal discourses were deployed to fight Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalism. At this time, an arbitrary legal framework denied any form of otherness by establishing that anything other than what it had established would be labelled illegitimate, criminal, seditious or simply terrorism. The implementation of the state of exception, in the forms of the legal-political and onto-politics, have promoted the use of exceptional measures and mobilized extreme forms of state violence in opposition to Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalism.

The USA developed two strategies of particular significance: on the one hand, the stigmatization of the counter-hegemonic and anti-colonialist movement as terrorist and the use of juridical-political terms or strategies for their control/extermination; and, on the other hand, the implementation of the “enemy’s criminal law,” exemplified by laws such as the Seditious Conspiracy Act and the Gag Law — legal tools that permit the criminalization and the superimposition of law and legal discourse on politics and thus legitimize state violence. (pp. 165-166)

In modern times, imperialism and colonialism is engrained in Puerto Rican culture and ways of being. A great part of our history has been erased or altered and our cultural
institutions are under a constant threat. Writers such as Nandy (1989) and Fanon (2007) claim that imperialism and colonialism are responsible for such disorders amongst colonized peoples provoking disconnect from their historical backgrounds, languages, social relations and their own ways of making sense and interacting with the world.

In Puerto Rico, colonialism keeps manifesting itself in various ways. On September 2017 Hurricane María destroyed a great part of the island’s infrastructure. The federal government’s indifferent response to the crisis was criminal. Thousands of people died in the aftermath of the hurricane. The shortage of relief supplies and the negligence of the authorities prevented help to arrive to where it was needed the most. On January 18, 2020, after weeks of tremors and two major earthquakes in Puerto Rico that left thousands homeless and in need of relief supplies, a warehouse full of unused aid from Hurricane Maria was discovered. The government kept the aid to favor the private sector, mostly North American mega stores that were losing business because of the aid. Mega stores that have establish themselves in Puerto Rico, destroying the local economy and exploiting its workers while collecting copious amounts of wealth. Colonialism in Puerto Rico is not so much about political persecution and assassinations anymore; it is about dismantling our social relations and about the perversion of our own by the great economic interests to collect our natural and personal resources.

As Villenas (1996) mentions in her writing, I had not considered my own multiplicity of self and identity until I started to confront my colonization, displacement and marginalization in relation to how the dominant culture conducts research and how my education in the academia informed the approach I took to research. My weekly visits to UpBeat opened up a Pandora’s box I had only seen at a distance. What I mean is
that for several years, through the critical study of research literature, I have been on a path to becoming more aware about the imperialistic and colonial implications of research and the different ways to engage with work that attempts to decolonize research, knowledge and spaces of learning. Wilson (2004) claims that,

A large part of decolonization entails developing a critical consciousness about the cause(s) of our oppression, the distortion of history, our own collaboration, and the degrees to which we have internalized colonialist ideas and practices. (p. 71)

My work at UpBeat set the stage for me to be critical about my positionality which resulted in a painful suspicion that became evident as the study progressed: as a Puerto Rican and Latinx, I am the result of a historically violent colonization that persists to this day, but as an educated Latinx ethnographer from an Ivy League institution, I am also a potential colonizer in my own community.

I stopped a block away from UpBeat and just stood there for a while. It was early, I had time. What an unbelievable journey I had been through! I remember thinking about how the time I had spent at UpBeat felt like forever but squeezed between yesterday and today. I was afraid about the interviews. I was not worried about Romeo and Rose; I was worried about Isabel and Marcela. I wasn’t worried about Camila either. I knew that if I stayed around for the times she had classes she would be willing to do the interview. Every student in the ensemble had signed consent forms and had agreed to do the interviews, but naturally, they could change their minds. I felt like not only I needed those five interviews for the study, but also for the sake of the ensemble and our experience. I needed them to help me make sense of what we had been through, that’s why I was afraid. I felt we needed some time to debrief, to have some closure. Maybe it was me who needed closure. I became emotionally attached and I didn’t resist. I think
that not suppressing my emotions allowed me to operate from a place of honesty, a place from which I could care for the students in the ensemble. Hill (2006) describes that in his own work he found himself, “in the ignoble paradox of choosing between doing, ‘good research’ and dishonoring the relationships that [he] developed or between being a good friend and failing to execute a rigorous ethnographic study” (p. 941). I don’t believe that this paradox mirrors my positionality; however I can relate to his struggle and the general feeling of acting in a way that dignifies and honors the humanity embedded in ethnographic work.

I picked my spirit up and walked towards the door. Once inside, it wasn’t difficult to find Isabel. I approached her and asked for time and I was not successful. I would later find Romeo and Rose and had a wonderful and enlightening conversation with them but as soon as I got on the bus home after I couldn’t stop thinking about what had happened with Isabel. I was confused but not surprised, angry but mostly frustrated. I restrained myself from journaling in the bus as I had done on previous times. I wanted to wait until I got home because I recognized that my anger and frustration would keep me from being objective although Brayboy and Deyhle, (2000) claim that,

Being objective when studying a group of which one is a member is impossible, and claiming objectivity can work against gaining accurate understandings and lead to dishonest and unethical positions. (p. 165)

When I got home, I felt the same way and I wrote the following entry (which I will break down into sections), in my journal:

Today I got to UpBeat earlier. I wanted to find the cellist and try to talk to her. For the last weeks she has been avoiding the ensemble. The attendance has been very poor lately. It’s done really. So, I decided to start conducting interviews in these last few weeks. (14 May, 2019)
As I had decided after my last conversation with Romeo, it was time to move on to the interviews. The composing ensemble sessions were absolutely done. I am glad I started with the interviews before the time anticipated because it took me a long time to be able to get some time to talk with all the members of the ensemble.

Isabel generally in class is quiet. I remember only once that she got into it and started to give her opinion about the music and was about to suggest a change, and when I asked her to keep going or to elaborate, she completely avoided the situation. She just said it was nothing or shook her head saying no and that was the end of it. It is my opinion that she is an outstanding student. She is absolutely talented. She plays a few instruments. Her principal instrument is violin, but she decided to play cello in the ensemble, and she is doing a terrific job. (14 May, 2019)

I can see now that I wrote this entry with great frustration. As I read, I recognize my efforts to remind myself of those qualities I attributed to Isabel based on the time that I have known her. They are all true but it’s feels like I am working through the rapid changing emotions I had at the time because approximately an hour before I made this journal entry Isabel had responded negatively to my attempts to interview her. The way it happened really got to me.

We had our moments, but in general it has been really hard to connect with her. Many times I had the doubt as why is she here. She really acts like she doesn’t want to be. Definitely acts awkward around me and avoids me if she can. I have never ever gone after her to bring her into the classroom, I have let her be. But no pressure on my part doesn’t mean no pressure at all. After all, the students really see this as a class. So, I guess that for a responsible student like her (I am assuming this because of the way other students have talked about her before, like how she does in school. Looks like she is always on top of her things. Good grades, etc.) It might feel like she’s skipping class? I really don’t know but with her is where I feel that that line between student and teacher is more drastic. (14 May, 2019)

I would often times ask myself, why is a student here if they don’t want to be? Why are they acting that way? In this case I was having trouble making sense of the “good student” reputation Isabel had amongst her peers and the way she was acting towards the
ensemble. In reality, I was upset and frustrated because of the way she was acting towards me. When I wrote this, I felt that she not going to the ensemble was something that was happening to me, not to her.

When in the ensemble she always knows what’s going on, my teacher intuition is telling me this. And every time we play, she needs little guidance; she plays and remembers her notes even when we are sort of sketching with sounds without writing them down or anything. (14 May, 2019)

Ever since I met her, it was clear to me that she is an efficient and talented musician. I didn’t notice it only in the ensemble but in the performances, I attended during the time of the study as well. Even when I am praising her abilities, I am struggling to understand why she is not behaving the way I expected her to, the way we had agreed when we began the study. At this moment in time, I almost see as contradictory her musical competency and her choice to not come to the sessions.

I asked her if we could meet for 30 or 40 minutes to conduct an interview. She freaked out; she was like, “for what?” And I was like wow, you gotta be kidding me. What do you mean for what? I didn’t say that, but I thought about it. I told her that this was very important and as we discussed at the beginning of the study it was one of the ways I collect data. She walked away, like literally walked away while I was talking lol. WTF I’m really interested in what she has to say, If she agrees. I can’t force her, and I guess that is part of the study. The administrator, to whom I had spoken about this before, just told me he spoke to her because he saw our interaction. He told me that he knows I don’t want to pursue them or force them because of the study but he felt she was disrespectful. I’m not here to judge them or anything but please don’t let me hanging. (14 May, 2019)

I stood there motionless for a second or two. I have no idea of how much time went by before I decided to brush it off momentarily but while I was there, still and quiet, a mixture of emotions moved through me. I asked myself: What just happened? I had been for the better part of an academic year navigating through challenges, constantly updating my approach, negotiating with the circumstances, understanding my mistakes and trying to become a part of a pre-existing community after initially having attempted to create a
new community that would include me from the start. For a considerable amount of time until that moment I had been transitioning from a researcher who expects to get something to one that hopes to give something. Is this how it ends? The way she looked at me when I mentioned the interview; I won’t be able to interview her now, I thought. When she asked me, “For what?” I tried to explain like I did the first day. But her question was more like a nervous reaction, so she walked away in the middle of my response. I felt bad, like I did something wrong.

After I collected myself, I decided to go upstairs to the big room to try and find another student to interview. I found Romeo and Rose and they happily agreed to talk to me. There was a lot of noise on the room and I was having trouble concentrating and Romeo and Rose seemed like they wanted to talk to me at the same time, so I didn’t object. I don’t remember at what exact time as I don’t specify it in the journal, but the on-site administrator approached me at some point. He felt that Isabel had been disrespectful to me in the way she had handled the situation, so he spoke with her briefly. I was genuinely grateful to him and to his intentions, even when I was not going to force Isabel to participate from the interview or had anyone else intervene in that way with her to either persuade or scold her. I felt supported in a difficult moment and for that I will always be grateful.

In a previous occasion, when Isabel was not showing up to the sessions, he came to the room where I was and told me she was upstairs and asked me if I wanted him to go get her. At that time, I explained to him my decision to not chase down the students who wouldn’t come to the sessions. In the past we had many more students and some of them would often skip the sessions or arrive late even after seeing me arrive. When he asked
me, “why?” I said that all kinds of ways in which the students react and engage with the composing ensemble and with me were potential sources of data therefore interesting to me from an ethnographic point of view.

After Rose, Romeo and I finished our conversation, I decided I would go home. I still had enough time to interview Isabel and I even thought about trying to approach her a second time, but I felt like what had happened with her was something important and that I shouldn’t take it lightly. I decided to let it be for the time being and I gather my things and left UpBeat for the day. During the next few days, I reflected about the incident and the reflection was eye-opener. However, I remained conflicted. I added the following lines to the original journal entry of May 14:

(After a few days):

As a human I am reacting to this in a wide range of emotions. A part of me wants to be authoritative, and just put my foot down and try to get some answers. Because all sorts of things cross through my mind: laziness, irresponsibility, maybe she doesn’t give a fuck and thats’ all there is to it. But after I rage with these thoughts internally and remind myself that it isn’t really about me, I start feeling disconnected and out of touch. I wonder if the reaction Isabel had was because of personal situations and the unwillingness she may have to be seen? I’m out here thinking that what I am doing is good and great and all of that but is it really that? My student is a female identifying hispanic teenager. And even when it is true that the bonding, I have had with my students during this study has been greatly due to our common hispanic heritage; that alone might not be enough, I might still not be trusted. Why should she trust me? I can’t begin to imagine the things she deals with daily. I thought I knew but I don’t know how they see me now. I have doubts. Maybe just as a higher education researcher? A teacher? Unwanted authority figure? Lame teacher? Lo! But seriously, why would my students in the South Bronx have to trust anyone from Columbia University? What has Columbia University done for them? I am suddenly questioning my path, my role in all of this. In a place where I felt like home, surrounded with other brown and black students, I felt like a total outsider. Isabel doesn’t know this, but her reaction sent me to school again. It showed me the part I play in our own oppression and how I have internalized and adopted colonialist actions. I am grateful that this happened, it puts everything into perspective. (14 May, 2019)
As documented on the previous chapters, I was able to interview Isabel eventually. She was the last person I interviewed, and the interview happened during a gathering and celebration for the students of UpBeat and their families. Camila, who is good friends with Isabel, accompanied her to the interview. During the interview Isabel opened up and the interview ran smoothly. I didn’t ask Isabel about the incident we shared. However, I didn’t arrive at that decision easily. There were at least two main possibilities to consider. On one hand, asking her about the incident could potentially help me clarify and understand her reasons to resist participating from the interview at first. However, I doubt that Isabel would’ve attempted to clarify her actions and to expect her to do so seemed like an imposition on my part. On the other hand, asking her about the incident might’ve made her uncomfortable therefore potentially affecting our ability to establish a connection during the interview. After reflection, I decided that I would conduct the interview as established on my protocols.

I do not claim that Isabel’s initial hesitation to being interviewed was caused because of a conscious act of resistance against the oppressive discourses of “othering” that Western intellectuals have imposed over indigenous and minoritized communities or that she would name it that way. However, her reaction made me confront and question my involvement in the continued colonization of indigenous and minoritized communities. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the incident with Isabel challenged my knowledge and uncovered my roles as a colonized colonizer: “Attempting decolonizing research requires that knowledge be viewed differently” (Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley & Yazzie-Mintz, 2012, p. 13). The multiplicities of self and identity became a lens through which I re-approached my research work at UpBeat. This
new lens helped me to understand the feelings I had during the early sessions at UpBeat of being an outsider in my own community and also provided me with a path that will hopefully lead me towards understanding next steps in the efforts to how to decolonizing research.

**What Now?**

According to Hymes, (1972), Pratt, (1986), and Said, (1979), (as cited in Hill, 2006),

> Because of its long history of methodological, epistemological, and ethical shortcomings, ethnographic work has been long implicated in the maintenance of the imperial project because of its fetishization of the exotic and problematic constructions of the Other. (p. 928)

Villenas (1996) claims that the key to resisting and fighting “othering” and marginalization is to make useful our multiplicity of identities in order to tolerate and to welcome contradictions and ambiguities (p. 728). The research I conducted at UpBeat and the awakening that my positionality granted me the opportunity to explore and to embrace the intersection of my multiplicity of identities and to see it as a powerful advantage in my career as an educator.

In the field of education, “there is a very rich history of research which attempts to legitimate views about indigenous peoples which have been antagonistic and dehumanizing” (Tuhiwai, 1999, p. 12). Villenas (1996) talks about how being personally involved and having convictions instead of staying neutral is at the center of the decolonization work that as a woman researcher of color she feels she needs to engage in:

> I cannot continue to pretend that as a qualitative researcher in education, I am distanced from intimacy, hope, anger and a historical collectivity with Latino communities. For these reasons, I cannot be neutral in the field, because to be so is to continue to be complicit in my own subjugation and that of Latino communities. To take on only the role of facilitator is to deny my own activism.
I must recognize that my own liberation and emancipation in relationship with my community are at stake, and that continued marginalization and subjugation are the perils. (p. 727)

As a Puerto Rican and Latinx researcher who also finds himself navigating between two worlds of being, it is almost impossible to not identify myself with Villenas’ view. Her views and commitment to justice and activism reminds me of Said’s (2012) commentary about the intellectual:

The intellectual’s representations, his or her articulations of a cause or idea to society, are not meant primarily to fortify ego or celebrate status. Nor are they principally intended for service within powerful bureaucracies and with generous employers. Intellectual representations are the *activity itself*, dependent on a kind of consciousness that is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment; and this puts the individual on record and on the line. (p. 20)

Both Villenas and Said promote a commitment that rests on a strong conviction or higher calling. Villenas is devoted to the generation of new knowledge that focuses on the dilemmas of minoritized groups in relationship to the majority culture. She adds that,

As some [members of marginalized groups] enter the ranks of teachers, administrators, and scholars, [they] are becoming the enforcers and legitimators as well as the creators or official knowledge. (Villenas, 1996, p. 728)

Said (2012) claims that, “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public” (p. 11).

The first time I had the chance to sit down with all the transcribed data from the study I couldn’t read it. I needed some time to think. How could that stack of papers hold so much? That stack of papers contained our composing ensemble’s story. A story I felt unprepared to tell. After all, I was, and still am, changing. Today, I ask myself another question: Am I ready to represent and embody my message as Said illustrates?
Am I brave enough to embrace a side, my side? Am I ready to become the activist that Villenas talks about? The activist that my Latinx community needs?

Table 2

*Lesson Plan: Minimalism*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Plan: Minimalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Listening:</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Nagoya Marimbas - Steve Reich</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Group Discussion:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What do you hear?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Second Listening with Score</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Group Discussion</td>
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<tr>
<td>“What is unusual about the score?”</td>
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<td>“What is familiar?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>E. Information</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss the concept of Minimalism. Provide more examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philip Glass - Mad Rush</td>
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<td>Steve Reich - Piano Phase</td>
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<tr>
<td>Etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>F. Group Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small groups of two. “Based on what we have discussed and listened to, come up with a 4/4 bar that you feel comfortable repeating continuously. Choose natural pitches only.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>G. Sharing and Performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask the groups to share their work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Model how to conduct a musical episode with the student’s music.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ask someone to do it after you</td>
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<tr>
<td>H. Final Discussion and Reflection</td>
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Chapter VIII
DONT’T LEAVE JUST YET

My wife has a little rectangular tray in which she serves tea. It is like an inch and a half deep and it has a painting of a tree and flowers inside. When she serves tea, she meticulously organizes the tray with everything that is needed. It has a container for hot water and two glass teapots. In one of the teapots she steeps the tea and then she filters it to the other teapot through a filter that mimics a lotus flower. In addition to those utensils, she also includes in her tray two little glass cups, one for each one of us. Every day as I read and write, she fills my cup. When I ask her what’s inside the cup she answers: Love. I laugh, but it’s true. As I approach the end of this dissertation, I ask myself: What am I pouring into my student’s cups?

In the previous chapters I have attempted to tell a story that can hopefully present the journey that the students at UpBeat and myself went through while experiencing the composing ensemble. To the best of my abilities, I tried to present the thoughts and the experiences of the many voices that participated, including my own. In this chapter I hope to take a step back and address specific findings that resulted from the study. These findings are not the only and definite findings. But I have identified four major sections that I will be discussing in this chapter: a) A Composing Ensemble’s Blended Curricula, b) Whose Community? c) The Stages of Creativity, and d) Culture, Colonialism and the Perils of Research.
A Composing Ensemble’s Blended Curricula

When I designed the study, I felt we would produce more music than what we did. I now realize how ambitious my projections were. I thought we would have enough material to produce a small concert in which we would share the results and the creative products of our time together. In that case, this question would yield results that would allow us to understand compromise and conciliation as it surely would’ve happened in our ensemble. We didn’t have many moments of collective negotiations, at least not in musical ways.

I feel like I constantly negotiated with myself trying to find a balance between the needs of the study and the need of the students, ultimately leaning more towards the latter. This feeling is synonymous with the pressure that many public-school teachers across the country live with:

Many state education departments have placed even greater weight on the same managerial equation that has failed repeatedly in the past: State Standards = State Tests; State Test Results = Student Achievement; Student Achievement = Rewards and Punishments. (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 181)

These high-stakes accountability systems place their focus on students and teachers:

“Educational improvement is not accomplished through administrative or legislative mandate. It is accomplished through attention to the complicated, idiosyncratic, often paradoxical, and difficult to measure nature of learning” (p. 182). This is what is meant by teacher action research. This is what teacher action research hopes to achieve.

In the context of the composing ensemble at UpBeat I was not completely free of these pressures. They were embedded in my subconscious. I like to think that I am a teacher that focuses on process, but when I fail to see results within the time frame I expect to, I get nervous. I question myself and I am tempted at times to shift from a
student-centered approach to a more top-down, teacher-centered one. In my desire to provide a space in which the students could have the choice to design their own path towards music composing in a group setting, I was extreme and off-balance at first.

Perhaps I was being too informal in my approach. Green (2002), argues that identity, friendship and enjoyment are intrinsically connected to particular ways of learning like playing by ear, copying and imitating music recordings and transforming those into new pieces of music while improvising and jamming with friends without the concern for regular practice or technique, and working without the presence of a teacher, lecturer, curriculum, syllabus or system of assessment (p. 216). I agree with some parts of Green’s argument, but in my years of experience, when I have given full choice and autonomy to students, they have preferred to do other things other than to focus on creating music collectively.

I have seen and experienced what is described in the above paragraph in small, out-of-school bands. When I was a kid, I played in many informal groups. A few friends would come together on Saturdays and lock ourselves up in someone’s garage and we would play for 5 hours straight. The friendships and the bonds that were created are still strong to this day. We learned a lot bouncing off ideas and tricks off of one another and we made our own versions of many songs without a teacher. However, we were not in a classroom. We didn’t even attend the same school. Green (2002) also says the following:

Playing music of one’s own choice, with which one identifies personally, operating both as a performer and a composer with like-minded friends, and having fun doing it must be high priorities in the quest for increasing numbers of young people to benefit from a music education which makes music not merely available, but meaningful, worthwhile and participatory. (p. 216)
I agree with this; however, it didn’t happen for the composing ensemble. Even when the students in the room knew each other and constantly played together in other ensembles, in our sessions they were passive. My strategy of removing myself from the equation to allow them to manifest themselves was not working and it was making me doubt the informal approach. The truth is that there were many musical concepts that they needed explicit direction, guidance and practice before they felt comfortable to engage in the way I was asking them to.

“I mean, honestly, I personally don’t like composing. I don’t know, I feel like I’m not creative. So, I just like to stick to reading music, I don’t like composing, myself. So usually when we did that, the class I just follow, whatever.” I’m not sure if I believe these words Isabel told me during the interview. It’s difficult to know with her because I recognize in her many of the things I did as a teenager to remain unseen in certain situations. At the same time, I have no reason to not believe her. During the interview I asked her what was difficult for her: “When you would ask to play, improvise. I don’t like improvising, I don’t really know how to do that, so I feel uncomfortable. Yeah.”

Marcela shared with me some of the things that made her feel out of her comfort zone: “Because I’m in a wind ensemble. I’m in a jazz live band. What I’m used to is wind instruments, […] being surrounded by instruments that I know that I can connect with. It’s hard when it’s all strings.” In the composing ensemble she had the chance to be close to strings: “I knew everyone in the room. It was much odder. It wasn’t what I was used to. But like with the violins I could hear what they play, and I can play it back.” Because of the particularities of the instruments, being closer to the strings challenged her in new ways: “My instrument’s kind of weird. I can be in tune in like this [snapping her
fingers], but any little thing will affect it. So, it was much harder for me to be always in tune with others or constantly try to match them.”

Camila also felt her experience coming into the ensemble was different: “So, it’s just having a little bit of everything was kind of just different because you might have heard some things more than others.” One of the challenges of the composing ensemble is the unpredictability of its instrumentation. Our case was not particularly problematic; we had two winds and three stringed instruments. However, the proximity to instruments of other families made a difference in the way the students name their experiences:

I’ve never heard up close how the clarinet would try and create their own type of solo or how they would use their fingers for certain notes and I just learned a lot from just observing up close.

A constant observation amongst the students when talking about how they felt approaching the ensemble as an individual centered on technical aspects of orchestration. Camila said, “The difficult part was knowing how everybody’s parts would fit in. Because especially if it’s rhythm then you have to know certain times that people are coming in.” Camila also spoke about the possibility of textures in the ensemble:

Or especially if it’s just the instrument and how it sounds. You want to know what part it should come in or how you should try and blend in with the certain instrument that you’re going to be working with.

Observations like these ones are a testament to the students experience in ensembles. As a composer and educator, I was constantly noticing how they were already considering compositional elements and techniques that had not been presented to them in explicit ways before, which is a point in favor of informal learning. However, even when some of them might’ve made observations and connections like the one Camila is describing,
their own perceived lack of technical knowledge prevented them from taking a leap into collaboration.

Rose told me that, “composing was a thing I was always interested in.” She continued, “I wanted to make my own music and I wanted to know what would I make. What would it sound like? Would it sound like everyone else’s? Would it sound different? What genre of music would it sound like?” As I would expect about anyone about to join a group like was being presented to the students at UpBeat as the composing ensemble, Rose was hesitant: “When you came while we were just talking about that in the summer, me and my brother, I wasn’t so open at the beginning. I just wanted to know what this was going to be about. […] Then I got comfortable.”

Romeo, Rose’s brother, said that at the beginning, the composing ensemble “nearly felt like any other class that I’d been in.” I think this point is important. I believe that there is something peculiar about a classroom setting. There is some sense of officialness and accountability in a classroom. The presence of a teacher, even one that tells you that it’s okay to do things differently and that allows for more openness, will still carry the weight of formality. He continued, “Then, just the only difference was me composing my own thing in front of people, it was kind of odd.” Why was it odd? I asked. “It was kind of odd. I’m like, ‘I’m given this chance and it’s different.’ I’m writing it down; I’m making my own piece. […] Then, it had me think back like, ‘Oh, I don’t think I’m ready for this.’”

It seems clear that upon approaching the composing ensemble the students were both careful and curious. Their musical values, ideas and experiences were negotiated through their curiosity about how the other musicians transmitted their own. I believe
this curiosity was manifested and directed to technical aspects of how other instruments work. I felt that their curiosity also responded to their feelings of unpreparedness. I think that a very interesting finding that results from this conversation is the fact that even in a large ensemble, with so many people around you making music together, the performers can still feel isolated. As shared by the students of the ensemble, it seems that beyond their instrumental group sections, they have little to no interaction with other performers in other instrumental groups. The idea of access to other musical groups and ways of musical knowledge, the exchange of information and the multidimensional understanding of everyone involved in the process of creating and performing music should be the foundation for the composing ensemble.

On Chapter V, students answered questions about their perception about me in the ensemble and how it changed over time. For the sake of brevity, I will not re-write their expressions. However, their answers were clear; they needed me to be more of a teacher. Brooks & Brooks (1999) suggest that,

The people working directly with students are the ones who must adapt and adjust lessons on the basis of evolving needs. Constructivist educational practice cannot be realized without the classroom teacher’s autonomous, ongoing, professional judgment. (p. 181)

I believe that finding the balance between enough teacher intervention and enough student self-direction is the key to the composing ensemble. The students needed me to be more explicit about certain concepts and when I was, they were able to pick it up and move on quickly.

**Whose Community?**

After the experience I had, which I narrate in the Prelude to this dissertation, it became clear to me that I was indeed an integral part of a broader community. This
community was formed by other musicians and even composers, professors, administrators and many others who were part of the Puerto Rico Music Conservatory, and even other musicians that did not attend the conservatory. My laboratory-like experience with the trombonist made it clear to me that moving on, there was no reason why I shouldn’t engage, participate and benefit from the community I was a part of.

This realization changed my outlook and influenced the rest of my formation as a composer. Almost every piece I wrote during that time I did so in collaboration. The nature of the collaboration was flexible. Sometimes, in exchange of knowledge and first-hand experience I would write music for a specific person and during the creative process I would do my best to understand that other person’s craft. Beyond being interested in the capabilities of the instrument, I was interested in the possibilities of the particular person through their instrument. An orchestration book could tell me that a violin sounds bright and powerful in D Major, and dark and warm in Db, but only a violinist could communicate to me without words how that affected them as a person and as a performer. For the sake of time and efficiency, my professors would encourage me to make sure that my score and parts were clear, but only through collaboration could I learn how a manuscript from my own hand could communicate something that an inkjet printer couldn’t. Through my community I found support and encouragement.

When it was decided I would work at UpBeat, I immediately was confronted with the reality that creating a community would be difficult, but it was necessary for the composing ensemble to work. I designed different strategies with that aim. There would be a brainstorming session every week and we would start by drafting a constitution to jump start our community. Writing that now, reading it over again, and thinking about it,
feels surreal, distant and almost comical. As discussed in previous chapters: the constitution plan failed. While we did have brainstorming sessions, most students were quiet. I managed to have various successful brainstorming sessions with Romeo and Rose at times when they would be the only ones to show up. I theorized that maybe the students, being acutely smart teenagers, were not about to commit to a constitution drafted by or in conjunction with a stranger. Or maybe, they were resisting the mere concept of regulation and policing. Even when these could both be part of the reasons; I believe I was fundamentally wrong in my approach. Caught up in the idea of giving the students choice, possibilities, freedom and a space to be creative in their own terms, the fact that they were already a community went completely over my head. I believe this realization is one of the greatest finding of the study.

Of course, they resisted my attempts to form a community because they had their own, which was working fine. During the interviews, I asked the students if they felt that they were connecting with other members of the ensemble at any time and most of them said that those connections existed before me: “I was mostly already very connected with most people in the room. But now I feel like we’ve gotten closer. Because we’ve never really talked to each other.” Camila’s words made me remember the many days I would spend in isolation working on my compositions: “We’ve only seen each other. But then after those days that we’ve been with each other, I’m making music I felt like we became closer instead of how we were from the start.” Rose chose to give a non-musical example:

Because we play music together, and you’re a cool person, I get to know the person more. Sometimes we had moments when we weren’t playing anything. We were just laughing about something. I guess those times.
For Isabel it was the fact that she wasn’t surrounded by strangers seemed to make her feel a little more at ease: “Well, we’re all friends, so it was a little bit more comfortable and when somebody would have ideas we would all just bounce off of that idea. So, I guess, technically we kind of connected with somebody’s idea.” Romeo described connecting with other in a musical sense: “We’re connecting musically because we’re playing the same piece; we’re trying to compose something, but it’s just the fact of how you play it and how would it be equal or how would I get this sound from this instrument.”

The problem was me. I was not a part of their community.

**The Stages of Creativity**

The composing ensemble didn’t experience stages, but a muddle, and culture was embedded in all aspects. Little about our story as an ensemble was linear. We had ups and downs and moved more like an ascending and descending spiral rather than a straight line. In the context of our ensemble and the study there might be two spirals of creativity: the students’ creativity and my creativity as a teacher/researcher.

I believe that through understanding my positionality in the ensemble I was able to find my place within UpBeat’s community. At first, I thought that my work as a teacher although related, was separate from my efforts to establish a community at UpBeat. I prepared the study and the strategies I would use during our sessions. I was trying out and testing my plans. I was not getting results, so I kept preparing myself. I would use the data that I would collect every week, field notes, journal entries and brainstorming sessions, to keep adjusting myself.

However, the moment I was waiting for in this regard didn’t come suddenly, it was the result of constant reflection, doubt, hesitation and a back and forth journey on the
spiral that the creative muddle is. When I realized that just because I had some common heritage with most of the students in the ensemble, I was still an outsider, I was able to really understand my positionality. That was the turning point. It was not a stage in a linear process, it was a spiral that intertwined with another spiral, mine and the students.

When I changed from caring about the students to caring for the students, I started seeing results. This fundamental changed prompted me to approach our sessions differently and prioritizing the student’s real needs. I think it would be fair to say that these changes helped paved the way for our musical breakthrough of December 9 when the composing ensemble worked as imagined.

I don’t see the students’ experience to follow or to fall clearly under Hickey and Webster’s creative model. I could make it fit, and I did so in a previous version of this document. However, in our setting, creativity happened differently. Their views about me help to illustrate the space between them and me. Marcela called me “a random adult” at one point, Romeo said he felt at the beginning that our sessions were just like any other class. Camila said that she saw me as “not well grounded” when we began. I was truly alien. I had to change my approach for them to feel comfortable. Making the decision to put the students first was the winning ticket. Only then I was able to give the students what they needed from me they were able to unleash their creativity. Not as in linear, and not as in a checklist of stages, but their first leap into the spiral happened when I started caring for them.

When I offered a lecture about certain composing concepts I did so because I felt it was what they needed at that point. In Chapter VI, I explained in detail the events of December 9th and their significance to the study. As mentioned in the previous section,
just because I shared some cultural background with the students does not mean I am culturally the same. I was coming to a place that had a strong sense of community with the intention of making community. The strong reaction and resistance that I encountered was overcome when my positionality was clear to me.

Culture, Colonialism and Research Perils

As discussed in Chapter VII, to conduct this study was a transformative experience for me. I know I have told this story from my perspective, but it’s the only way I can. I found myself living between two worlds. In one world, I am held down by the colonization that my ancestors suffered once, and the colonization that my fellow Latinx sisters, brothers and siblings still suffer today. In the other world I am a trained researcher who attended a privileged Ivy League institution. As I mentioned before in Chapter VII,

I had not considered my own multiplicity of self and identity until I started to confront my colonization, displacement and marginalization in relation to how the dominant culture conducts research and how my education in the academia informed the approach I took to research. As a Puerto Rican and Latinx, I am the result of a historically violent colonization that persists to this day, but as an educated Latinx ethnographer from an Ivy League institution, I am also a potential colonizer in my own community.

Dei and Kempf (2006), say the following about colonialism:

Colonialism, read as imposition and domination, did not end with the return of political sovereignty to colonized peoples or nation states. Colonialism is not dead. Indeed, colonialism and re-colonizing projects today manifest themselves in variegated ways (e.g., the different ways knowledges get produced and receive validation within schools, the particular experiences of students that get counted as [in]valid and the identities that receive recognition and response from school authorities). (p. 2)

I understood that being Latinx does not exclude me from becoming a colonizer to my own communities. This realization changed my approach to how I treated the students. I
have discussed various times throughout the study how I went from caring about the students to caring for them. Dei and Kempf (2006) also argue that:

Colonialism is not simply complicit in how we come to know ourselves and its politics. It also establishes sustainable hierarchies and systems of power. Colonial images continually uphold the colonizers’ sense of reason, authority and control. It scripts and violates the colonized as the violent “other,” while in contrast, the colonizer is pitted as an innocent, benevolent and [imperial] savior. (p. 3)

Like creativity, anti-colonial work is not linear, and it is certainly not over.

**Research Interests**

My study aimed to answer and discuss the following research interests:

- What does creativity look like in the culture of this classroom ensemble and how do the context inform the product?

As seen in a previous section, the creative process for our composing ensemble was a non-linear muddle in which culture was embedded in every step of the way. Both the students and I had our own processes which became tangled through honesty, care and cultural competence and understanding.

The answer to the second part of the question has a straightforward answer. The students in the composing ensemble were all students at UpBeat. There is a detailed description of the programs offered at UpBeat in Chapter IV. The music that was made in the ensemble as discussed also in Chapter VI is consistent with the past and current (at that time) musical experiences of the students. A surprising finding was to see how the students demonstrated technical compositional proficiency in the musical choices they made in their collaboration. The melodic and rhythmic motives created and developed by the students are consistent with good technical practices within the study of composition.
• How do individuals name, express and negotiate their musical values, ideas and experiences with others?

This question was born out of the assumption I had that I would come to UpBeat to create a community. Trying to do so failed because the students were already a community. UpBeat is not a school in which students change semester by semester. The students at UpBet grew up together many of them. They were, and still are a thriving community. I was not part of that community and my imposition generated resistance.

Aware of my mistake, I asked students about how they were connecting with other throughout the study. Most of them answered the same thing: they already felt connections with their peers. In terms of musical values, they all expressed their fears and feeling of inadequacy to engage in composing. In my effort to give them choice and space, I forgot to be a teacher.

• I am also interested in the different ways that my participation affected the ensemble.

Some students saw me as a regular teacher, others as a friend and another as a random adult. While students’ perceptions changed throughout the study there was consensus in the fact that they needed me to be more of a teacher at times.

**Implications for the Field**

It is difficult to examine work that has become so personal in the hopes of finding implications that could benefit the broader community. Having said that, I want to share a few perspectives I have gathered from my experiences doing this study. I arrived at these points by asking myself: Where is my work going after this experience?
The study took a turn when I started to become aware of the multiplicity of identities within me and how they manifested at the intersection of community and academia. This realization not only took me towards a path in which my main preoccupation became the students who took part in the study, but also made me critical about the incursion of researchers and ethnographers in marginalized communities. While I believe that qualitative research, done with sensibility, can be helpful to bring attention and legitimacy to those communities that have been left out or delegitimized by academia and other social institutions in the past, my new hunch is taking me beyond that point.

My hunch begins with a question: What does anti-colonial research look like? One of my main concerns during the study was the apparent disconnection between what scholars are interested in and what communities need. In many occasions I felt that researchers and ethnographers including myself, have a view about the necessities and problems that affect communities that might not be informed by the realities of the actual communities. In Chapter IV, p. 132, I write about ‘how I was asking for something, but I wasn’t really giving anything.’ Is this what research does in communities? Should the interaction be, in the very least, transactional?

Another concern I constantly struggled with was representation. While academia seems to be very aware and worried about mis-representing marginalized voices, I ask myself: What if good representation is not enough? Should we listen to marginalized voices because of their own will? These questions led me to think about possibilities in which I could give back to the community and simultaneously have their voices heard. I arrived at the concept of activism.
What would happen if scholars like myself decided to become activists in marginalized communities to share our privilege and knowledge about research with the youth? What if scholars decided to empower marginalized youth to be representatives of their communities, to research the problems that are truly affecting them, report on it and take action? What if young researchers started publishing and generating new knowledge that comes from their communities? I believe these are questions worth asking by everyone in the academic world.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

As soon as I finished the sessions, I asked myself, how would I do things differently? I would be interested to see another scholar explore this study. My experience as a researcher, ideas like Villenas’ multiplicity of self and Said’s intellectual representations were a glimpse into how I see my future as a researcher. For that reason, I would also be interested in research that contemplates the composing ensemble as a body to generate and support activism through artistic creation. How would the composing ensemble operate beyond school? Does it have a space in the communities’ form of life?

**Final Thoughts**

I set out to form a composing ensemble that could exist between the general music classroom and the large ensemble in the public system of education. My rationale was that having the composing ensemble as an alternative, would help in the effort to make creative spaces available for our students encouraging critical thinking and therefore protecting the continuity of democracy. Now, more than ever I believe that the
composing ensemble has a space in public education. However, I also believe that in order for our students to be able to acquire the necessary tools to creatively solve the problems of our society, therefore preserving democracy, there needs to be a democracy in the first place. Our minoritized communities have been in danger for a long time. Dehumanizing discourses, systemic oppression and racism are alive and well and people are out in the streets dying. Is a music pedagogy that centers on activism possible? Hess (2019) claims that “realizing this pedagogy, however, becomes a way to make music education even more deeply meaningful and further allows educators to shape our social engagement in society in ways that center humanity” (p. 167).

Are we as scholars listening to the needs of marginalized groups? My personal answer would be: I am doing my best. However, it is currently not enough and I need to be held accountable. As Tuhiwai asks: Whose research is it? I wanted it to be from all of us at the composing ensemble, but it is really mine. Who owns it? It is definitely owned by me and no one else. Who will benefit from it? I am already benefiting from it. Hopefully it can influence other researchers to ask similar questions. Maybe then, it can evolve into benefiting future participants of future studies. However, currently it only benefits me. Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? I have. Who will carry it out? I did. Who will write it up? I did. How will its results be disseminated? It is my suspicion that it will mostly and with luck, go around in the academic world.

I would like the answers to those questions to look different in regards to my study but the truth is the truth. The change towards anti-racism, anti-colonialism and self-accountability needs to start at home. I have a long journey ahead of me but I’d like to think that I am underway. I ask myself, how did I cared for my students during the
study? Did I really shifted from caring about to caring for? I humbly but confidently say I did. It took me a minute, but I changed my perspective and decided to meet them at the point they needed me to, not at the point I thought they would be at. The magic of inner voices manifested itself in the form of flexibility and understanding. When it came down to caring for the students, my own wishes became secondary. I used a variety of strategies, from lecturing in a teacher-centered way to assigning notes and conducting. All as the inner workings of something that was always bigger than myself. In the end these strategies supported the overarching strategy of openness and student-centered education but to care for the students meant I was willing to make those compromises.

I also ask myself, how did I care for Isabel? Did I do the right thing at the time of our incident? I stood back, I gave her space, I explained the importance of her participation, but I did not insist. Was that enough? What other precautions and preparations should I have done to ensure that an episode in which a student felt that way never occurred in the first place?

As I write these last lines, I think about the journey that has brought me here and I realize I walk away with more questions than answers. Because of doing this study, and having had the opportunity to meet Isabel, Camila, Rose, Marcela and Romeo, I am better. But are they? How useful was it for them to participate in the study? Did I do anything for them? Did I help in their liberation? How is my old community doing as I close this chapter of my life and move to the next one? Have I done enough? Have I done anything at all? What am I pouring into my students’ cup?
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Parental Permission Form

Teachers College, Columbia University
535 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

Protocol Title: A Composing Ensemble: Creating Collaboratively with High School Instrumentalists
Principal Investigator: Yan Carlos Colón, Ed.M. Teachers College
ycc2111@tc.columbia.edu 787-226-2714 IRB#: 18-447

INTRODUCTION

Your child is being invited to participate in this research study called “A Composing Ensemble: Creating Collaboratively with High School Instrumentalists.” Your child may qualify to take part in this research study because they are high school instrumentalists that attend an after school music program in NYC and have some large ensemble experience. Approximately 15 children will participate in this study and the total time of participation is as follows: a 75-90 minute weekly session for approximately 15 weeks, a 25-45 minute performance at a day outside the 15 weekly sessions, an interview of approximately 30-45 minutes and a focus group of 45 minutes.

This study is about composing collaboratively. It aims to understand the experience of students and a teacher composing music together. The specific focus is to understand the creative process: (preparation, incubation, illumination and verification) as it may exist in a large ensemble format where young composers write for and with their peers. If you decide to allow your child to take part in this study, your child will participate of the following activities:

- **Composing sessions** - The participants will engage in diverse activities leading to the creation of music by themselves and collectively. They will also test their progress in their instruments by themselves and collectively. These activities imply taking notes, playing their instruments, discussing and brainstorming with others. There will be approximately 15 composing sessions.

- **Brainstorming Sessions** - The brainstorming sessions will help the group assess their progress, expose ideas and re-think approaches. In these sessions the participants can express their ideas and feelings about the way the process is evolving. Even when participation is encouraged, it is not required. The brainstorming sessions will act as a 'check-in' and will happen at the beginning of every composing session and will last 5 to 10 minutes.

- **Concert** - The participants and the teacher will present a concert with a selection of the music composed during the duration of the study. There will be only one presentation and it will be a day additional to the composing sessions.
Interviews: The interviews will last around 30-45 minutes and will draw material from the brainstorming sessions. This will help the researcher understand process, change of perceptions and ideas, evolution and will also provide the participants with a chance to clarify some of their earlier comments if necessary. Every participant will be interviewed once.

Focus groups: There will be three focus groups with 5 participants and myself. These will be chosen randomly. In the focus groups the participants will react on the experience of the composing ensemble. These will last 45 minutes. Each student will participate once in a focus group.

The brainstorming sessions, interview and focus group will be audio-recorded. After the recorded data is written down the original recording will be deleted. If you do not wish your child to be audio-recorded, your child will not be able to participate. Your child will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep their identity confidential.

This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that your child may experience are not greater than your child would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Your child might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that arise from composing collaboratively. However, your child does not have to answer any questions or divulge anything they don’t want to talk about. Your child can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. The principal investigator is taking precautions to keep your child’s information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering what they say or their identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of their name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

Your child’s identity will be known to other focus group participants and the researcher cannot guarantee that others in these groups will respect the confidentiality of the group. As a researcher, I ask that your child keep all comments made during the focus group confidential and not discuss what happened during the focus group outside the meeting.

There is no direct benefit to your child for participating in this study.

Your child will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for your child’s taking part in this study.
The study is over when your child has completed the interview and the focus group. However, your child can leave the study at any time even if they haven’t finished.

The investigator will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your child’s real name with their pseudonym.

For quality assurance, the study team, the study sponsor (grant agency), and/or members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected from you as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your child’s name or any identifying information about your child will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the principal investigator.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO RECORDING
Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded. If you decide that you don’t wish your child be recorded they will not be able to participate in this research study.

____ I give my consent for my child to be recorded __________________________

Signature

____ I do not consent for my child to be recorded __________________________

Signature

____ I consent to allow written, and/or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College __________________

Signature
Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

___ I do not consent to allow written, and/or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference________________________

Signature

If you have any questions about the study or your child’s taking part in this research study, you should contact the principal investigator, Yan Carlos Colón León, at 787-226-2714 or at ycc2111@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your child’s rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu. Or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection at Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT’S RIGHTS

- I have read and discussed the informed consent with the investigator. I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my child’s participation is voluntary. I may refuse to allow my child to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty.
- The investigator may withdraw my child from the research.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to allow my child to continue participation, the investigator will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies my child will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Your child’s data will not be used in further research studies.
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent document.

My signature means that I agree to allow my child participate in this study.

Child’s name: _______________ Print Parent or guardian’s name: _______________

Parent or guardian’s signature: ________________________________

Date: __________________________

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Appendix B

Assent Form for Minors

Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York NY 10027
212 678 3000

Assent Form for Minors

Protocol Title: A Composing Ensemble: Creating Collaboratively with High School Instrumentalists

Principal Investigator: Yan Carlos Colón, Ed.M, Teachers College ycc2111@tc.columbia.edu
787-226-2714 IRB#:18-447

This study is about working together. I want to how you and a teacher compose music together. Specifically, I want to understand about the creative process you experience with music. This study is voluntary; you do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you want to participate (and your parent/guardian agree) you will be asked to do the following:

• Composing sessions – With your instrument, engage in 15 composing sessions.
• Brainstorming Sessions – Check-in on your composing progress at the beginning of every composing session and will last 5 to 10 minutes.
• Concert – With your teacher, you will present a concert with a selection of the music composed during the duration of the study.
• Interviews – Be individually interviewed by the researcher for 30-45 minutes to discuss the composing and concert process.
• Focus groups – Meet with 5 other students like you and talk about your experience of the composing ensemble for 45 minutes.

The brainstorming sessions, interview and focus group will be audio-recorded. If you choose not to be audio-recorded, you cannot be in this study. After the recorded data is written down the original recording will be deleted.

This is a minimal risk study, however, you might feel embarrassed to discuss problems that arise from composing collaboratively. However, you do not have to answer any questions or say anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating at any time.
You will be given a fake name (pseudonym) in order to keep their identity confidential. For the focus group, others may know who you are. However, I will ask the group to not discuss what happened during the focus group outside the meeting.

Assent Verification

I __________________ agree to be in this study, titled A Composing Ensemble: Creating Collaboratively with High School Instrumentalists.

What I am being asked to do has been explained to me by ___________________.

I understand what I am being asked to do and I know that if I have any questions, I can ask __________________ at any time. I know that I can quit this study whenever I want to and it is perfectly OK to do so. It won’t be a problem for anyone if I decide to quit.

Name: ____________________________
Signature: ____________________________
Witness: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Investigator’s Verification of Explanation

I certify that I have carefully explained the purpose and nature of this research to __________________ in age-appropriate language. He/she has the opportunity to discuss it with me and knows that they can stop participating at any time. I have answered all of their questions and this minor child has provided the affirmative agreement (assent) to participate in this research study.

Investigator’s Signature: ____________________________
Date: ____________________________

Teachere College, Columbia University
Institutional Review Board
Protocol Number: 18-447
Consent form approved until 08/08/2019
Appendix C

Score

Clarinet in B♭

Trumpet in B♭

Violin

Viola

Violoncello