

# Musical sensibility can help shape teaching, research education

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University of Illinois education professor Liora Bresler says the underlying similarities between teaching, research and music can be a powerful metaphor for education and qualitative inquiry. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The underlying similarities between teaching, research and music can be a powerful metaphor for education and qualitative inquiry, according to a University of Illinois professor of education.

Liora Bresler, a professor of curriculum and instruction in the U. of I. [College](#) of Education, says that the inherently performative and improvisatory aspects of teaching, along with the temporal, polyphonic aspects of scholarly research, compares favorably with musicianship.

"The act of teaching or performing research in any field involves seeing things with a fresh set of eyes in order to deepen interpretation and meaning, as well as being able to communicate new knowledge so the audience readily understands it," she said. "In that sense, teachers and researchers can learn a lot from music and musicians, who must perceive, listen and improvise to stay 'in tune' with their audience."

Bresler, who studied musicology and was a pianist before becoming an education professor, said that knowing there was an audience to perform for "really intensifies the relationship between the music and the performer." This, she said, is analogous to how a teacher should think of a lecture or a researcher a presentation at a conference.

"A musician would approach a piece of music by looking for meaning, and then how they would interpret it and perform it," she said. "All throughout that process, they pay much more attention and are much more focused and organized, because they know they have an audience to perform for."

Similarly, when a researcher prepares to delve into a subject or a teacher reviews notes for a lecture, Bresler said the whole process of making meaning is intensified.

Teachers can think of a lesson "as if it's a musical form - there's harmony, rhythm, tension, orchestration, higher- and lower-intensity dynamics," Bresler said.

"When you teach, you have a lesson plan, but you're not bound to follow it. You play, follow up, improvise and adapt, as the situation dictates. It's intellectual engagement, and you want to be engaging. So having a real, live audience makes a difference."

Bresler said that the commitment to a third-party audience helps the

teacher "see, perceive and make sense of what they're trying to communicate on a very different level."

For researchers, the dynamic is slightly different from teaching.

"Research and teaching are very similar, but researchers have the luxury of taking the time to really think and say, 'What does it all mean?' " Bresler said. "Teachers have to act in real-time, in the moment, and have to make a lot of decisions on-the-fly. What's common is a sense of ownership, caring about the subject, and then being able to organize and synthesize it in ways that make sense to them and their audience."

Bresler said that while research has a more significant solitary component than teaching, the intellectual retreat of research is preparation for the more social aspects of scholarship - similar to a jazz musician who practices licks in private so the music is heard as effortless and spontaneous on stage.

"In qualitative research, thinking about a project is a solitary activity," she said. "Going to places, interviewing people, presenting research at a conference are all highly social activities, somewhat like a performance. Data analysis and writing up the actual research are both solitary activities, but they are informed by the same two-way communication between author and audience that informs music."

To train better scholars and educators, Bresler said people need to be trained how "to see better, to listen better, and to make better connections."

"Our different sensibilities help us become better teachers and researchers in the sense of making meaning and communicating to others."

Bresler's research was published in the *British Journal of [Music](#)*

Education.

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