

# Towards a Process Model of Developing Artistic Practice Within Experimental Music Communities

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**Abstract:** While extant experimental music literature has positioned this amorphous musical tradition as a valuable educational context, most studies have focused on formal education spaces and ignored how experimental musicians learn within informal music communities. To address this gap in the literature, I present emergent findings from case study research into two experimental music series. Through this analysis, I propose a process model of developing artistic practice in experimental music.

## Introduction

Within recent years, multiple scholars have argued for the educative value of experimental music, or the amorphous collection of musical genres and traditions that reject the foundational and organizing tenets of western music (e.g. rhythm, melody, repetitive structure, etc.) (see Gilmore, 2014). For example, studies have found that experimental music engenders agency (Tinkle, 2015), promotes experiential learning ala Dewey (Sordahl, 2013), and develops musical skills and knowledges in students (Hickey, 2015). However, the vast majority of studies into experimental music education pedagogies have focused on formal education contexts and not the informal communities through which a large portion of experimental musicians develop their craft as performers and composers (Thomson, 2007). This potentially leads to skewed understandings of how individuals develop musical knowledges (see Green, 2001). To address this gap in the literature, I explore the following research question: how do experimental musicians develop their artistic practice within informal music communities? In doing so I propose a process model of how individuals develop musical knowledges and, thusly, their own artistic practice.

## Methods

The data used to address my research question comes from an ongoing, year-long comparative case study (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016) of two interrelated music series: The Experimental Education Series and the Noise Knowledge Consortium. Events from these series include concerts and workshops featuring local and national veteran experimental musicians and occur in a community arts space and makerspace, respectively. For this poster, I utilize emergent findings from semi-structured interviews with thirteen of the artists from these series. Questions from the interviews focused on the artists history in experimental music, their intentions behind planning the workshop, and their experiences both teaching and performing at the series. After fully transcribing the interviews, I employed an open and iterative approach to both descriptive and thematic coding techniques (see Saldaña, 2015). I then used this analysis to propose what Glaser & Strauss (1967) define as a substantive theory of developing artistic practice shared among participants.

## Findings

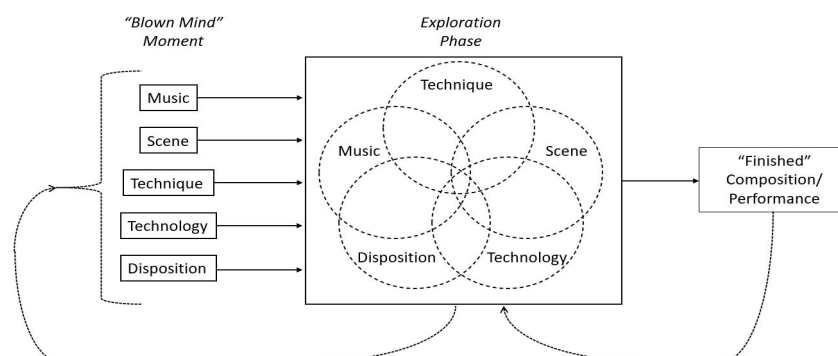


Figure 1. Situated Process Model of Artistic Practice in Experimental Music.

Based on this analysis, I propose a situated process model of artistic practice within experimental music communities that largely involves three distinct phases of development: the "blown mind" moment, exploration phase, and presentation of new works (see Figure 1). Starting with an artist's introduction to this process, the "blown mind" moment (named after a phrase used by multiple interviewees when discussing their practice)

represents an encounter with some aspect of experimental music that fundamentally realigned their orientation towards music, artistic production, or their own identity. These moments came from exposure to five overlapping elements of experimental music: technologies (i.e. instruments, recording devices), performance or composition techniques, musical dispositions, experimental music communities or scenes, and the music itself in the form of performances or recordings. For example, Bill Mueller (who performs as The Smudge) describes his first experience encountering experimental turntable techniques while watching a Kid Koala music video: “I was so impressed with the idea of using a turntable... as an abstract instrument in which notes in a horn part... [are used] as a textural thing. I couldn't believe it. I said, ‘I need to buy turntables.’” Witnessing this particular, non-traditional technique therefore inspired Mueller to begin the process of becoming an experimental musician.

In the second part of the process, the exploration phase, artists explore the affordances of experimental music that emerge from the “blown mind” moment for an extended period of time. Again, participants divided the aspects of experimental music explored during this part of the process into the same five categories (technology, technique, scene, music, and disposition). These themes often blended together, with one aspect of the music or music community leading to another. Lea Bertucci exemplifies this blending when she describes her engagement within experimental music during this phase: “I was going to shows and seeing what people were using, like putting a contact microphone on a table and kicking it around. Then we would go into a practice room and just set up pedals and experiment.” In this quote, Bertucci engages two separate aspects of experimental music at the same time, the scene (in the form of going to shows) and instrumentation (her pedals), with the sole intention of discovering the range of sounds and expression in the scene and her own musical gear.

Finally, artists take the knowledge constructed through these explorations and present new work to others in the form of a performance or recording. However, participants conceptualized this process as highly iterative, constantly experiencing “blown mind” moments and returning to the exploration phase after having developed finished work. This leads to a constantly evolving artistic practice. Amanda Schoofs connects to this iterative process throughout her musical life: “What I'm doing now as an experimental artist is different than what I was doing two or three years ago and it's very different than what I was doing when I was five and had a tape recorder.” This points to the iterative nature of this work, positioning artistic practice within experimental music as something that constantly changes and grows without defining an end point a priori.

## Conclusion

Through this analysis, I build on extant literature by proposing a process model of developing artistic practice within experimental music communities outside of formal education contexts. These findings accent Thomson's (2007) assertion that experimental musicians often develop their craft within informal music scenes by producing a model through which this learning can occur. As this research project continues, I intend to further refine this model by exploring the intersection of formal and informal experimental music education praxes and considering the influence of other artistic traditions. Moreover, by replacing “scene” with “community” and “music” with “artifacts,” this model could potentially apply to a wide range of communities beyond experimental music contexts. Future research should consider whether or not this model applies to (or generates insight into) other experimental music subgenres or communities as well as other informal, non-musical creative traditions.

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