

CHAPTER 4

Fill in the Blanks

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Abstract: This is a “storied act” of creative thinking. It is an autoethnographic exploration of a composer, the composed, and the attempt to compose myself. How can a(ny) moment or thing trigger my imagination to freely explore, capture, and shape it into something *sharable*? “Fill in the blanks” is an exploration of creative engagement and independent thinking rather than an automatic reply. The composer is B.D. Moe, who is also a musician, a teacher-colleague, and a friend. The composed, this piece, is a story, tracing research pathways with art, through art and conversations on art – and life itself. I started the research process with some notes on my Iphone about things I wanted to remember from our conversations and collaboration, reflecting on the philosophy of arts education and the force of creative thinking, making, and doing. But what moves a thought, and what becomes of it? I would like to stretch and transform the blank space to foster many (unknown) ways of knowing, modes of inquiry – celebrating “artfulness” (Chemi, 2014), curiosity, and creativity in learning and living, as well as in research. I weave fragments of narratives, images, sounds, and music into a *piece* of their own, filling in the blanks as I go along.

Keywords: creativity, composing, autoethnography, music education, artfulness, arts-based inquiry

Setting the scene

I am prepared to take a(ny) moment or thing, fuel my imagination, freely capturing and shaping it into something *sharable*. *Fill in the blanks* is an exploration of creative engagement and storytelling rather than an automatic reply. In the context of higher music education, or even arts education in general, I am concerned about the impact and status of knowledge

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that fits neatly and repetitiously into the blank space. I would like to stretch and transform this space to foster many (unknown) ways of knowing and modes of inquiry – thereby celebrating *artfulness* (Chemi, 2014), curiosity, and creativity in learning and living, as well as in research. I want to “feel the field” (Martin, 2019) and adopt “methodologies of the heart” (Pelias, 2004). Given the theme of this anthology, it is most likely that the reader is linked to education, artistic practices, arts-based research or creativity studies. I come up with many questions throughout this “piece” (Hickey-Moody, 2019). Indeed, I may gently challenge the idea of what this is, because creativity studies rarely take place on their own; rather, they’re a luscious entanglement, a meshwork of ways of being, belonging, and becoming. I want to show and share my act of research as a small contribution to addressing academic, artistic, and pedagogical freedom, fostering creativity in higher education, finishing with these overarching research questions: How can “filling in the blanks” forward ways of knowing which celebrate inquiry through thinking and making, listening, artfulness, and creativity as central values and qualities in arts education when becoming entangled with everyday life? To help me answer this question, I start out with a poem, *Take a moment*, which is followed by an explanation of how I have used an arts-based, narrative research methodology when working with this piece. I then present three narratives to voice the themes of carriers, craft, and care. I lean on narrative inquiry (Bresler, 2019; Fretheim, 2020; Pelias, 2008;) and sensory ethnographic approaches to research (Ellis, 2004; Martin, 2019; Pink, 2015), positioning myself within a feminist new materialist (Hestad-Jenssen, 2022a) and performative field (Bolt, 2016; Hickey-Moody, 2020). Writing serves as a generative force, perhaps a sort of *aesthetic activism*, and I experience thinking, doing, creating, and researching to be intertwined (Chemi, 2014; Craft, 2015). I wonder and wander freely and fluidly between these. I’m writing this in English because I want to...and besides, the word “artfulness” does not exist in the Norwegian language. Also, I think English is beautiful, my mother is American, and I may even learn some new words and phrases along the way.

This is a “storied act” of creativity (Björk, 2022). It is a performative autoethnographic exploration (see for example Jenssen, 2022a; Jenssen,

2022b; Spry, 2011, 2016) of a composer, the composed, and the attempt to compose myself. This *piece* (Hickey-Moody, 2019) is an entanglement of narratives, music, images, people, and places. I set these in motion by playing with bits and pieces, intertwining thinking, listening, creating, and researching *artfully*. I wonder and wander freely and fluidly among the above, letting my mind, body and heart collide as events unfold (Martin, 2019). I am having a lot of fun while doing it, and this explorative space of creative writing (and being!) allows me to reorganize “emotional investments” (Hickey-Moody, 2019).

Take a moment

I open my Tidal¹ and search for the playlist that holds the album *Take Care*, then press the play button on “The Earth,” which starts playing quietly in the background. Then I take out my Lippy Chic Ultra Crème Rouge lipstick, climb up on a chair and start writing with it on the window’s surface:

Take a moment. Any moment.

Research it as a creative act,

make up your own arts-based approach.

Write a piece. In parts. In solitude.

How do you start? How does it end?

Please continue where you stopped.

In between modes and moods.

Fill in the blanks.

It’s a pleasure.

Moe and notes, and notes on my iPhone

Bodvar Drotninghaug Moe is a composer, educator, musician and friend. We have known each other and worked together for a long time (since 1997 as university colleagues). While we share common interests in music, art, and teaching, our conversations mostly dwell on creativity and life’s

¹ Tidal is a music streaming service app.

many curiosities. I call him B.D.Moe throughout the text, both because I like the flow of these letters and perhaps to create my own story. By the way, which stories of music, life, and learning do we tell and repeat as music educators? What becomes our mantras, and are they passed on as we pass by and, eventually, pass away?



Figure 1. Notes on my iPhone

When B.D Moe came close to retiring from his university position (yet a long way from retiring from composing!), I started taking notes on my iPhone, making a list of things to remember from our conversations and meetings (such as teaching or concerts); these were often details. Few composers retire from making music altogether, though they may stop working in fulltime positions and having other responsibilities. In academic settings scholars are sometimes honored through the publication of a *Festschrift*, a volume of writings by different authors and presented to the scholars as a tribute. Fortunately, artists leave us their artistic works, sometimes accompanied by stories of the works' creation and the artist's biography. We may enjoy reading these *back* stories as they potentially expand on or explain what happened before the work was created. Sometimes I think the stories “behind the scenes” are even more

interesting, beautiful or resonant than the work itself. Are they really reflections of something or someone? Can they be reproduced?



Figure 2. Classroom at Nord University, Levanger campus. Teaching composition to graduate students

Note: My fieldnotes from 24.03.21. Photo: B. S. Fretheim // Rene Magritte,² *La Reproduction interdite* [Not to Be Reproduced], Brussels 1937.

Going behind the scenes allows us to engage with a work beyond our senses; to grasp a piece of the mosaic process of creation by trying to get into the feeling and mind-set of another. Perhaps share it and retell it in the future (Pelias, 2008). So, I became more conscious of how knowledge and practices, as well as stories, have *carriers*, as I carried my list on my iPhone. Do you write lists? Are you afraid you will forget something? What do you leave out? Where do you collect your lists, and what do they recollect?

So let's go back to have a closer look at the iPhone list; content and order are random. The things we have either chatted lightly about or discussed deeply – and the ideas evolving out of these – are listed. I find them all to be interesting, important, funny, or moving, which supports Pelias' (2004) idea of the heart being close to what matters. One of the attributes of autoethnography is to document moments and details of lived experiences as “ways of knowing” (Ellis, 2004). Some words carry more weight than others, like “Laurie Anderson” and “Ukraine,” while others I don't

2 I remember this image from when I was little. We had a poster calendar, and this art work on was one of them. I remember putting up the poster page in my room. (perhaps next to Limahl!) As far as I can remember, that was probably my first encounter with surrealist art. I still love it.

even remember why I put down. I haven't erased any of them; perhaps I should. I think parts of it have some poetic qualities; I could be brave and playful, mixing a few lines and of course allowing myself enough artistic freedom to add a few words myself:

How do you finish a composition? On the sixth tone?
No.
Take a walk to Valse Triste
Do not look back; that's not where we are going
Pedagogy!
- Pax vobiscum
It has no ending

But composing poetry may be a bit on the side; in his chapter on creative writing lessons, Sawyer (2012) refers to the poet May Sarton, who claimed: "The poem teaches us something while we make it; there is nothing dull about revision." (1980, p. 50–52, in Sawyer, 2012, p. 321). Surely, the same idea applies with regard to music composition and research: What is the tacit knowledge of a teacher who teaches composing?

Composing a dialogue is a way of expressing and explaining creativity (Sawyer, 2012), a constant "dialogue with the page" (Sawyer, 2012, p. 321), allowing an expanded seeing (Bresler, 2018), screening, and scanning a selection of fragments. Barone and Eisner (2012) write about the invented dialogue and "revealed inner dialogue" as creative design elements. Perhaps I am also searching to be *more* creative when shaping an academic text and challenging certain conventions? Craft (2015), Tharp (2006), and Cameron (2020) also offer valuable perspectives on the creative process, all of which resonate with my conversations with B. D Moe. According to Craft (2015), he falls under "big C creativity," whereas the concepts of "little c creativity" and everyday creativity as "life-affirming activity" (Sawyer, 2012, p. 409) might be what I am dealing with here. Perhaps I am even seeking another discourse where "scholarship fosters connections, opens spaces for dialogue, heals." (Pelias, 2004, p. 2) while having some fun at the same time (Stinson, 1997). Will I handle the material with care? What is the speed of my writing, and on which sentences, images, memories, or sounds will I allow myself to engage in and dwell on a little longer? When do I care, or what do I care about? Does it require me to tread carefully? Will I remain composed?

First narrative: Teaching as craft - opening the cage

One of the things on my list to discuss with B.D.Moe is Cage. John Cage. When I was teaching students enrolled in the teacher training program, I suddenly got an idea 20 minutes before class started. My students were going to work on their interdisciplinary performance project called, “Tell your story,” and I had planned for them to listen to some excerpts of music by Laurie Anderson, Meredith Monk, Perotin, and Cage. So I invited B.D. Moe to show up outside of the classroom to meet with my students in the foyer. I wanted them to be face-to-face with a living composer who wore blue Nikes. I knew that B.D. Moe knew a lot about Cage’s life, music, and philosophy. I got so excited when I came up with this idea! I thought it would be enlightening for students to listen to stories told by another person in a different setting/space by surprising them and stepping outside of the ordinary in a spontaneous manner. I liked Peter’s (2018) article on Cage and learning to listen, as a “freshening of education” where artistic thinking is understood to be a form of listening, questioning what remains unsaid in the said.



Figure 3. Meet the composer in the foyer at Nesna College, 2015. Photo: Siri Ingul

We all gathered around the composer. First, he kindly asked them who they were and what they were studying. Then he sat down and chatted about Cage,- for about 4,33 seconds... To my surprise, he had brought his copy of Cage's *Notations* (1969). He then told an amazing story from when B. D Moe himself, who was studying composition at the time, attended a seminar where Cage was giving a talk. Although most of the lecture was completely incomprehensible, it was apparently based on the principle of *chance*, or random words put together, which is a major compositional principle in Cage's music! Brilliant. Stories can connect us to the past as well as music can, and I felt very satisfied with this encounter between the students and the composer.

Second narrative: Handle with care



Figure 4. Rolid, LANDART Gjerdrum 2017, artists Mindaugas Rimkus and Ole Kristian Jødahl.

Last year when doing fieldwork for this research project, I attended Moe's composition class for graduate students. The atmosphere was relaxed, with both laughter and serious discussion taking place. Moe responded to students' works, paying attention to the sound and details in their scores while at the same time opening up the space for everyone to share their

thoughts. – “We are discussing it for the sake of discussing,” he cheerfully stated, before actually praising the very high quality of the work done by one of the students. About another example, he said: “This wasn’t only melancholic and sad. It was uplifting in parts – but it all went to hell at the end. That’s the way it is: Melancholy takes over. It’s supposed to hurt a bit.” Perhaps fittingly, Moe has a music publishing firm called Care Records.

Interestingly, Moe claims that he doesn’t teach his students anything; neither does he know anything himself about pedagogy. I disagree. I think he is a very good teacher, using both “artistry and craftsmanship” (oh – what a standard comment – I may have to delete it!). His philosophy of teaching and composing could be described as follows:

- Be creative and playful
- Anything can be an idea
- Stick to what you are doing
- Just do it!
- Learn to steal; everything is a remix
- Write something – then something else
- Save your darlings
- Work hard

I asked B.D. Moe if he approved of my list, which he did. How long does it take for this kind of list to evolve? It is not a grocery list; rather, it is a longitudinal list. It’s a symphony of sounds, failures, and successes, a collection of experiences, pedagogies, practices, creative habits, courage, and mindsets, knowledge, people and places, conglomerating the wisdom of a teacher-composer. Okay, so I may have interpreted that list a bit freely, adding to it the weight of our dialogues.

We had a conversation [March 2022] at his home in Gjerdrum. I was happy to be able to visit him and his wife, as it is always *quality time* when I’m there. We open a bottle of Prosecco. Before anything is said, he plays the Ukrainian anthem, and we listen respectfully. Afterwards, he says, “I have become Ukrainian! It moves me. These melancholic melodies. That’s just the way it is.” I then press the record button on my iPhone.



Figure 5. B.D. Moe's hood, Napoleon bon Aparte (Street Art, Gjerdrum). Photo: B. S. Fretheim

The next morning we drive to the landslide (also a title on one of B.D.Moe's compositions) in Gjerdrum, passing Napoleon on the way. B.D. Moe ponders: *bon aparte* means good to be apart, alone. He likes his solitude. But he's actually wrong: *bon aparte* means a good match, a good party. We continue to talk about freedom – the feeling of getting into your car, driving to the grocery store yet wanting to just continue driving all the way to Rome. Fra Rema til Roma³. How are ideas of freedom expressed in music? In teaching? In talking with others? How free can you be? What are the sounds and reverberations of a landslide?

Third narrative: Melancholy and solitude

Min vemods fryd – “That’s a title I really like,” B.D. Moe says about this folk tune. [interview, 10.03.22]. I agree: I can feel this title in the

³ The sentence is in Norwegian; when translated to English, it means “From Rema to Rome,” Rema being a large Norwegian grocery store chain.

music. I can relate to it. It doesn't translate well into English...as it implies not only sadness and longing but also positive vibes that are not exactly bittersweet, perhaps more saltysweet. It's the wide space between *vemod _fryd* that is just one touch on the keyboard; and yet, it touches my whole heart. Melancholy and solitude – we share these emotions.

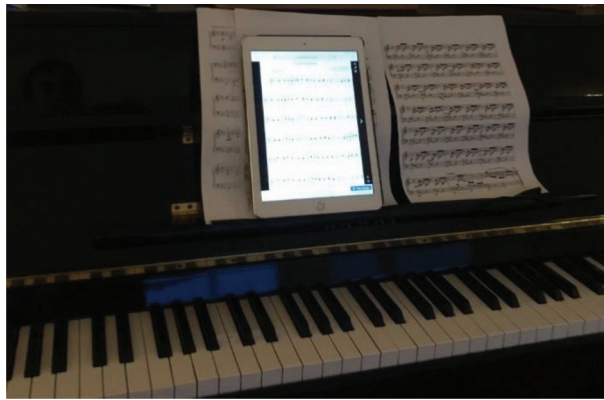


Figure 6. B.D. Moe's piano at his home; iPad and score. Photo: B. S. Fretheim

There were two pieces of music resting on the piano: the Ukrainian national anthem and the aria from *Goldberg Variations*. A few years ago I wrote an article entitled, *Back to Bach* (Fretheim, 2020), where I included a quote by B.D. Moe from our e-mail correspondence in 2017, where he shared his thoughts on the aria:

“The aria is perhaps, and I repeat PERHAPS, the only tune (!) by Bach I immediately experience sensuously. A lot of other music I initially experience only on an intellectual level. Probably just me. I often play this piece of music on the piano, and something happens immediately. A calmness? A need to play it again. A sorrow over its brevity. The aria connects me to something outside. What?” (Fretheim, 2020, p. 242)

Bach and the need for playing this particular piece of music again. And again. How would Bach feel if he knew that one page of music would last a lifetime and become someone's daily favorite? It felt as if I had received

a gift during my research process that connected the past to the present, reminding me of the power of musical appreciation.

Fourth narrative: Snooker and silent skills

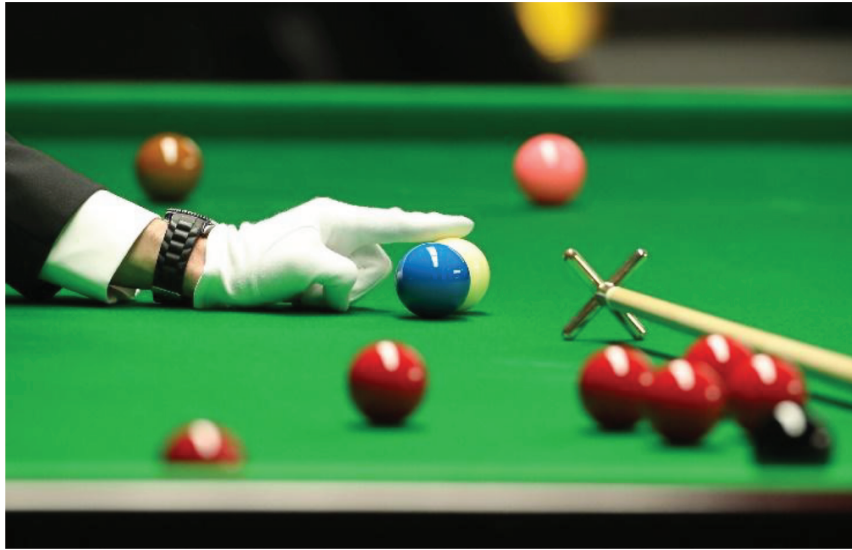


Figure 7. Snooker

I am snoozing next to my husband, who is watching snooker on the television. The silent slowness reminds me of a comment B.D. Moe once made on the game of snooker, suggesting that the referee had a dream job! Because all (?) he apparently seems to be doing without any fuss is to meticulously put the ball in its proper place on the table, after which the game may continue. I agree! The idea of knowing what to do and when to do it, then performing a simple and probably rewarding task with such ease and perfection not only depends on creative thinking (or overthinking), but also attention and a certain level of skill. A simple filling in the blank. Somewhat repetitious. Quiet surroundings. Does this slowness, solitude and tranquility come with age? The fall? The migratory birds? Is composing the opposite? When do you know what to do? When do you

press print, send or record? How does development, position or skill level relate to creativity? When is composing silent? Does it involve pain?

Final narrative

In 2022 B.D Moe published a piano work he composed for his mother for her 105th birthday called *Mi lille snille mor*; this song was not a token of love, but rather love *itself*. A year goes by. I step on fallen leaves as I talk to B.D. Moe on the phone while walking my dog; his words reach me through my EarPods. He is at his mother's house, and she is lying on her deathbed (in Nesna, a small town in northern Norway where I used to live. I know where he is walking -- the streets, the fields, the mountains, the sea). His mother is on the threshold of leaving this life at 106 (!) years of age. How strangely present life is when one is facing death, a truly existential moment, swaddled, silent, still, immovable, beautiful, and fragile. The white heart, the white lilies, the white swan. And immensely painful. Transparent as the blood drains from the heart, sheer and silklike.⁴ Pelias (2004) writes so beautifully that, "Without the heart pumping its words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched" (Pelias, 2004, p. 7).

I hope my students will have the courage to create their own original stories to tell, showing skills in whatever way they desire, playing with bits and pieces, entering on their iPhones things they want to remember and keep close to their hearts. The next page will be a blank. It's all yours. I just did it: displayed (some of) my creative habits. They are present and valuable qualities in my encounters with artfulness, arts education, as well as in everyday life. I'll let my heartbeat continue, dropping some lines, carefully composed, in between modes and moods. Discovering the pleasures of filling in the blanks – ones that can't be reproduced by anyone else.

4 Re-written from my research notes (27.09.22).

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