

## Interview with Dr. Luc Nijs, Ghent University (Belgium)

*Winner of the 1<sup>st</sup> Research and Practice Project Award 2012*



### Can you tell the EAPRIL community something more about yourself and your research background?

*I'm a professional musician, holding a Master in Music Performance. My instrument is the clarinet. I've been mostly active in chamber music and the orchestra. I teach the clarinet since 1996 in several music academies. My teaching activities have always been characterized by a continuous inquiring of the learning and teaching process. In a way, I was experimenting a lot to find all kinds of exercises and approaches to solve specific problems. Next to my activities as musician and teacher, I have studied philosophy. In 2008 I received a Masters in Philosophy with a thesis on the musician-instrument relationship. It involved a philosophical investigation of the process that underlay a musician's intuition of "becoming one" with the musical instrument. Based on this thesis, I received a scholarship to pursue a PhD in Art Sciences. My master thesis in philosophy was the basis for the development of the interactive music system that I used in my PhD project on instrumental music teaching and learning. During 4 years I worked on my PhD. I elaborated a theoretical framework and did several experiments on user experience and didactic integration. The iterative process between theory, technology development and empirical work was very intense but I learned a lot from it. For me, the most important aspect is the connection between this research and my teaching. The combination of thinking (and speculating), dealing with hard- and software, and sometimes struggling with methodology, had a profound impact on the way I teach. One could say that my pedagogical content knowledge has been broadened with technological pedagogical content knowledge and even with something like "research pedagogical content knowledge", because of the research skills that I've developed and that contribute to my thinking and acting as a teacher.*

### Can you tell the EAPRIL community something more about your awarded project?

*The awarded project was a study with an educational technology, namely the Music Paint Machine. This is an interactive music system that allows musicians to make a digital painting by playing music while making various movements on a colored pressure sensing mat.*

*In this study, I acted as teacher-researcher during nine months. I gave instruction to 12 children who learned to play the clarinet. The goals of the study were, first, to develop good practices with the system, and, second, to test the effectiveness of instruction with the system. The study followed a non-equivalent control group design with several pre-tests (e.g. personality, self-regulation skills, motor skills, audiation skills) to construct a profile of each student and a post-test (audiation skills) to test the effectiveness. It was hypothesized that using the Music Paint Machine during instruction would contribute to the development of tonal and rhythmic discrimination skills*

*and, as such, to the developmental tonal and rhythmic aptitude. The results of this study did not reveal a significant difference between the control group and the treatment group. However, in this study it became clear that conducting research with an educational technology in an ecological setting demands for measurement methods that go beyond a product oriented approach in which a pre-test post-test design is used to test the effectiveness (amplicative impact) of the technology. The integration of technology in instrumental music instruction affects the different components of instruction. To learn about technology integration, it is therefore important to have a look at how technology influences for example curriculum, interaction between teacher and student, their individual behavior and so on. And yet, adopting a control group design was very challenging, not only for the researcher in me but also for the teacher in me. The unique position of being both at the same time stimulated reflectivity. At this point I can only testify of the deep impact this had on my as a teacher. In the forthcoming months, I will do a micro-analysis of the video-footage of the lessons (132 hrs). I'm sure that this will reveal many interesting aspects of my teaching and of the students' learning.*

### **What was your motivation to apply for the Best Research and Practice Project Award?**

*When I received the information about this Award, I was actually writing my PhD thesis. Going through the questions for the application, I noticed that I was actually writing the answers to these questions. So I decided to take a break for one day in my thesis writing and focus on the Award. That was the more practical motivation. But I was mainly motivated to apply because I believed that applying for such an award was a way to present my work to peers and to get an evaluation of it in a different way than the usual peer-review for publications. I also must admit that I like competition.*



### **Why did you feel that your project made a good chance to win the Best Research and Practice Project Award?**

*I think that the most important reason for this feeling was the rationale of my research project, namely the idea that the possible integration of the system in a naturalistic educational setting is the *conditio sine qua non* to arrive at a valid scientific investigation. I've always wanted to stay connected to practice and to practice community. Unfortunately, this is too often the case my field of research. In everything I did for my research, I kept on thinking as a teacher. At the same time I've tried to adopt a very systematic approach.*

*I also think that my project is quite innovative for several reasons. First, the MPM is an educational technology that is very interactive and leads to a personalized end product through which a musician or learner can express him or herself. But at the same time, the MPM allows to focus on the process of teaching and learning. Second, the systematic approach of the longitudinal study is in our domain not evident. Most studies are about one shot experiences. Teaching weekly with the educational technology during nine months is rather exceptional.*



### How did you react when you found out that you had won the first EAPRIL Best Research and Practice Project Award?

*Of course I was very happy! Also a little surprised because my project is situated in a niche and because all the nominated projects were high-level projects.*

*Winning the award was the icing on the cake. I explain: It gave a very good feeling because the week before the conference I just did my PhD defense. I finished my longitudinal study end June 2012 and I submitted my thesis in September 2012. So the months in between were very intense. In a way I still had to recover from the months that preceded the defense and during which I wrote my thesis. Competing for the Award prolonged the excitement a little more and winning the Award made the "catharsis" more deep.*

### How has the EAPRIL Research and Practice Project Award and/or the experience of competing for this award (i.e. presenting your application at the conference in several timeslots) helped you and your research activities as a practitioner researcher?

*Every occasion to present your work, is a possibility to learn. Making the presentation, deciding what's in it and what's not, making the structure....contribute to have a clear view on your own research and this is necessary to set future path to go. Also preparing the very short poster-presentation was a good exercise. The evaluation form afterwards was also very interesting to learn about. People who do not easily ask questions after the talk, sometimes give their opinion through such a medium. As such, I got interesting information that I can take into account for future work. This whole experience led to some insights on how to continue my research.*

### This was your first EAPRIL Conference. How did you experience this first EAPRIL conference?

*The conference was great. I attended really interesting sessions; I've met many kind and interesting people. Also it was extremely well organized. Congrats to the EAPRIL team and the team of Jyväskylä!*

*I liked the idea of the cloud sessions and the session in which we talked to everybody in our cloud. The fact that EAPRIL tries to continue this after the conference is really great. I hope to contribute to this.*

### Why would you recommend the EAPRIL Conference to your colleagues?

*Attending conferences is always good. You meet people, learn about different perspectives and approach to your own topic.*

*I would recommend the EAPRIL conference in particular because of the diversity of topics. Also the idea of cloud sessions was very nice and interesting.*



## What makes a good practitioner researcher according to you?

*The first requirement is, I think, an open mind and the continuous desire to learn, not to prove that something is better than something else. For example, in my research, I continuously questioned the technology I used in the experimental group. I was trying to prove that we don't need the Music Paint Machine. Doing this, I invented new practices without the technology. In this way I wanted to make sure that lessons in the control group were not a take-off of real life instruction. I can say that precisely because of this way of working, this project deeply changed me as a teacher.*

*I think it is also necessary to strive for scientific rigor, both in constructing a sound methodology and in respecting the requirements of a naturalistic setting. This is necessary in order to transcend the anecdotal. To call practitioner research 'research', it must be 'reproducible' to certain degree: the design, measurement tools, analysis, ... the methodology must be made very clear so other researchers can do a similar study. I think this is basic. But this doesn't mean that we should get rid of the anecdotal because of its complexity. The anecdotal is probably very typical for the naturalistic setting. Just listen to teachers when they talk about their practice. Trying to avoid the anecdotal has most probably a reducing effect on the research, its outcomes and their interpretation. Therefore, I think it is the way in which the practitioner researcher approaches the anecdotal. I believe that the intrinsic and necessary link between design, experimental setup, measurement and analysis is very important here and needs to be taken into consideration when conducting the research. This will ensure a systematic approach.*

*A third requirement is to continuously be driven by pedagogical considerations and making the link to practice. The knowledge that is generated through practitioner research should be relevant for practice and even hold a transformative potential. This has certainly an effect on the methodology (e.g. on what to measure). Of course it is possible that the link with practice is not straightforward, but then the practitioner researcher should be able to communicate about his project in such a way that peers are able to translate it into their practice.*

*Finally, I would say that next to these and other aspects of good practitioner research, I believe a practitioner researcher should be passionate about teaching and doing research. This is beyond doubt most necessary to undertake this kind of research, which is utmost exigent.*

## Finally, what would be your advice for the applicants of 2013?

*Don't try to "sell" your project. Report on it as it is.*

*And: go for it with enthusiasm and belief in the thorough work you have done!*

**Thank you!**

**Interested in applying for the 2013 Best Research & Practice Project Award?**

**Visit our [Conference Website](#) and download the application form!**

**Deadline June 5, 2013**

