

Doug Friesen: A Profile

By Peter Blouw

When first introduced to the idea of using improvisation as a pedagogical tool in the classroom, Toronto high school music teacher Doug Friesen was a bit skeptical. Yet he was interested enough to invite musician Dave Clark to his school to do a workshop on free improvisation exercises with a group of students. The result, for Friesen, was a “truly brand new way to look at music education” (273). The students were able to be creative in an environment that encouraged experimentation rather than the careful replication of an existing piece of music, and as a teacher, Friesen felt that Clark’s improvisation games changed his own role from that of a leader to that of a member of a community of learners all equally engaged in the direction of a given class (269). This democratization of the classroom is, in Friesen’s view, invaluable due to its “usefulness with fostering and/or unblocking individual creativity within a community,” along with its role in enabling students to “create and own the music” being made (270). Confidence, fun, and creativity, in short, all seem to come out of the sessions. And given the results of Friesen’s experiences, he’s become a passionate advocate for improvisational pedagogy through his participation in workshops at the University of Toronto, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, the Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music, and various high schools.

The techniques Friesen uses are drawn in large part from the work of music educators like R. Murray Schafer, John Zorn, and Fred Frith. Schafer, for instance,

developed a number of improvisation games for use in the classroom, an example of which would be an activity that requires groups of students to prepare a musical performance in only a few minutes based on their interpretation of a “Graphic Score” (“Exercises”). Another similar exercise that Friesen uses was created by Dwight Shenk and involves some students dancing spontaneously while other students create music based on their immediate interpretation of the dancing (“Exercises”). According to Friesen, these games have allowed his class to “explore student leads [that take] us in directions that we never would have followed if I had continued being the sole navigator” (272). He also occasionally has students compose pieces to perform at specific locations in Toronto in order “to have their music interact with the soundscape of their choice” (“Saxophone Quartets”), with the purpose of these events being to help the “class to be more visible and connected” in the surrounding community (“Saxophone Quartets”). Overall, these points suggest that the techniques that Friesen uses are well in keeping with the description of improvisation as a site for both community building and collaborative creativity.

And as for the results for the students? Friesen puts it this way: “I’ve seen shy students take the lead with improvised conducting, ‘jocks’ continue improvising even after class has ended, and overly confident students follow their peers into new experiences” (273). Moreover, his class became very popular, with un-enrolled students expressing interest in participating (273), and a number of teachers-in-training voicing enthusiasm about the success of Doug’s program (274). Most

importantly, many of the students themselves have expressed very positive feelings towards the class. As one former pupil writes,

at the heart of it all was the foundation of our classroom: respect, openness, and experimentation. I carry this all with me, searching for learning experiences as passionate as the one I had with my peers in high school. I continually explore, experiment, and question, and find joy in sharing my insights with others. And what may have seemed like an “alternative” teaching method years ago is now the only method I understand. I bring it with me wherever I go. (274)

If this particular experience is at all representative of the feelings of other students, then it is safe to say that the use of an improvisational pedagogy in the classroom helps pupils to develop a set of skills and tools that are seen to be highly valuable throughout life.

Given the success of Friesen’s sessions with students, it is worth considering his results in the context of the broader claims made in favor of improvisation. His students and their experiences provide ample evidence that “improvisation demands shared responsibility for participation in community, an ability to negotiate differences, and a willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency” (Heble et al.). The students he works with are faced with the risks of creating freely in front of one another, the responsibilities of working together as a community of musicians, and the challenges of overcoming different backgrounds, cultures and musical tastes. Put another way, they embody and directly demonstrate the ways in which improvisation can manifest itself as a potentially

beneficial social practice. And it is worth noting that the benefits of such practices can likely be realized in more educational contexts than music instruction alone. Removing the teacher's pedestal, as Friesen remarks, can go a long way towards "giv[ing] students more confidence to explore their own creativity in front of others" (272). The exploration of such creativity is likely a goal for educators in disciplines ranging from the hard sciences to the liberal arts, and as such, it seems that improvisational pedagogies have value in arenas that extend beyond the teaching of music alone.

Works Cited

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