

Improvisation and Education – One Student’s Perspective

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Working as an Undergraduate Research Assistant with the Improvisation, Community, and, Social Practice (ICASP) project at the University of Guelph, I have been introduced to the power of improvised music to change the way students and educators alike look at the process of learning. Through my involvement with a number of ICASP’s different community partners I have seen how the forms and theory of improvised music can inform the ways in which people act in their communities.

My experiences at these community-based organizations have allowed me to participate in the act of improvising. As both a student and a researcher in the workshops I was able to view the sessions from a number of different perspectives. As a student, I began to realize that my role in the learning process was not so fixed. With reference to musical improvisation, learning becomes a highly dynamic process in which every sound, action, and silence takes on a particular significance and contributes to the material being learnt and taught in the classroom. In this way, the sonic gestures I make as a student can change the musical direction of the class just as much as those of the teacher or facilitator. Personally, this power to participate directly in the process of learning allowed me to be more invested in the classroom because I began to view it not simply as static and restrictive, but rather as an ever-changing community of learners in which my voice was respected and valued.

As a researcher, my experiences working in my community served to break down the barriers between academics and citizenship, and resulted in an approach to research that gives serious consideration to the lessons and knowledge of community partners. This type of collaboration between universities and organizations located at the heart of the community offers diverse, powerful, and poignant ways of thinking about the purpose and role of research. Improvisation, in particular, serves to debunk assumptions made about the authority of the academy by offering a model for collaborative projects that look for new and creative ways of addressing old and recurring problems. One problem that The Improvisation Tool Kit engages with is the notion of the academic “outreach” in the community. This idea is based on the belief that the university is the authoritative provider of knowledge in the community and suggests that those within the academy hold all the answers. In this way “outreach” becomes the righteous action of bestowing knowledge upon the community members. However, the type of collaboration involved in the various projects featured on this website (www.improvcommunity.ca) highlights the reality that the university is not always in the best position to address the problems and situations it encounters, and that community groups have a large amount of knowledge and expertise that the academy can learn from. With reference to improvisation, collaboration between the academy and the community allows for a more flexible, dynamic and comprehensive approach to research.

From participating in workshops and conducting interviews with some of the participants in the projects that make up this site, I have come to believe in the potential of improvised music to make learning environments a more enjoyable, hopeful, and inviting place to be. By expanding the concept of education to include active participation in challenging and rewarding activities, improvised music calls on students to respect themselves, their peers, and the educational process in general. This respect suggests the creation of a dialogic relationship between

students and teachers that transforms the learning process into a vibrant and exciting process of discovery. Embodying the values of community, leadership, acceptance, generosity, deep listening, and understanding, improvisation has the potential to be a very rewarding way of interacting with students in any number of different settings.