

Onward Willow Improvisation Games 2010: A Critical Reflection on Playing Across Disciplines

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PLAYING IMPROVISATION: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

In 2010 I joined Professor Ellen Waterman at the School of Fine Arts and Music at the University of Guelph and six third year music students from her department in a project based on improvisation games. The project was a part of Ellen's work with the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice research project (ICASP) where I was the 2009/10 postdoctoral fellow. Together Ellen, the students and I developed a program of workshops to be held at the Onward Willow Family Gateway at the Shelldale Community Centre in Guelph. After consultation with the Onward Willow programme, we chose to work with teenagers in the Friday night teen drop-in programme. This critical reflection is not intended as a description of the project (see the ICASP Improvisation Toolkit at www.improvcommunity.ca for a full report with practical tips, improvisation exercises, and workshop plans). Instead I reflect on how I brought my background to bear on the project and what it taught me about improvising across music and theatre in the community context.

Ellen and I chose the structure of "improvisation games" for this particular programme because we believed it fit both our backgrounds as teachers and facilitators and we hoped it would be flexible enough to accommodate whatever would develop between the university students and the Onward Willow participants. There would be no pressure to produce "compositions" or "shows," there was potential for fun and learning together and between us we expected we could gather enough games that could be adapted *in situ* to cover any situation. Great theatrical improviser, Viola Spolin, famously outlined why games have such an appeal for improvisers:

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing... Ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crises the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game's objective in any style he chooses... Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure. Out of this integrated experience, then, a total self in a total environment, comes a support and thus trust which allows the individual to open up and develop any skills that may be needed for the communication within the game. Furthermore, the acceptance of all the imposed limitations creates the playing, out of which the game appears, or as in the theatre, the scene. With no outside authority imposing itself upon the players, telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, each player freely chooses self-discipline by accepting the *rules of the game*

(“it’s more fun that way”) and enters into the group decision with enthusiasm and trust. With no one to please or appease, the player can then focus full energy directly on the problem and learn what he has come to learn.” (Spolin 5-6)

Spolin goes on to discuss the aspects of improvisatory play that she thinks are most important, removal of approval/disapproval and resulting feelings of personal freedom, group expression and interdependence, audience as sharing in the experience, theatre as training for communication and daily life, and a freedom of physicalization.

We set Spolin’s text as a reading and the response to her ideas from the students was an important reminder to me that we do not all improvise for the same reasons. Each of the six students saw improvisation games as fulfilling a different role:

1. Personal and community development
2. A way to involve/negotiate working in a group
3. A way to work closely between individuals with artistic and cultural differences
4. A way to create new types of cutting-edge art
5. Artistic skills development
6. Methods for modelling social equality

For me, improvisation games fulfilled a little of all of the above during the project. The notion of the game, however, took me into questioning how project design can itself be a game, a structured improvisation with certain rules, and fluid and playful execution of these rules, which adapt to constantly growing and changing goals and objectives. I wondered how improvisation as both transient and community-based could interrupt social trajectories and allow us to “play” alternatives.

HOW MY BACKGROUND INFORMED MY PLAY

My background working with improvisation began when I was a teenager, facilitating community-based performance on the North Coast of the state of New South Wales in Australia. I learnt some improvisation games at school and others as part of the various theatre activities I was part of outside school. Coupled with my early observation and reading about the work of directors such as John Bell in Australia, Robert Lepage in Canada and the foundational work of Keith Johnstone (filtered through the very Australian context of high school theatre improvisation competitions run by the Australian organisation Impro Corp Australia), I began to develop short scripts and performances through improvisation. I then began using improvisation games and exercises as a tool when working with my teenage peers to develop full length multimedia performance events. Some of these events were theatrical, character and story based, others were non-linear performance works. Over the ten years I worked on the North Coast, I also completed a theatre degree at the University of New South Wales, and in 1999 ran, along with a committee, the busy student theatre program (NUTS) at the University, facilitating 10-12 shows per semester, working onstage and backstage and coordinating a program of workshops and social events.

Through both my formal and informal training and experience in theatre and performance making I grew to use improvisation as both a means and an end. I felt that the most important work in rural and disadvantaged areas was to build individuals' capacity to make, recognise and challenge community through developing confidence, strength, support networks, and creative solutions *at the same time* as supporting their access to resources and growth as creative artists. Indeed many of them wished to, and have gone on to, achieve professional careers as artists, dancers, film makers, actors, directors, performance makers, and theatrical technicians. In the university context, it was during the improvisatory workshops, rehearsals, writing groups, and performances that people connected and challenged each other the most, and from which, in my opinion, the most interesting work arose. Student theatre was full of improvisation warm-ups, focus games, games that pushed skills or formed closely bonded groups and which, above all, made us laugh and know each other more. Improvisation, in these experiences, produced tight knit groups of confident people *and* fostered imaginative and innovative creative sessions and cutting edge, interdisciplinary artistic practices. As I moved into graduate studies and further developed my creative practice, the body of games and exercises I and my peers used to make performance grew, embracing party games, physical theatre work, Butoh, mime, 1960s performance art games, spontaneous and collective writing, dance, music, contact improvisation and body percussion. In the years that followed this period, I have continued to work with improvisation both as a tool for community making and contestation, and as a creative practice, across work as a university teacher in theatre and performance in Australia, a community arts development officer in Northern Ireland and a practice-based researcher in Canada, working with all age groups from toddlers through to the elderly. My academic writing has centred on community-based performance practices including guerrilla theatre, site-specific art, political performance and hip-hop music, art and dance, all of which incorporate improvisation. This background brought me to the position I was in when the Onward Willow project took place, working as a postdoctoral research fellow with the ICASP project, concentrating on community-based arts practice as research.

LINKING TO ONWARD WILLOW

Just after I arrived in Canada I heard that the community organisation Onward Willow was a partner of the ICASP project and, interested in the work of local community groups, I attended a conference co-hosted by Onward Willow in Guelph in October 2009. The conference *Intersection 09: Prosperity in Diversity*, co-sponsored by Guelph-Wellington Immigration Services, looked at immigration in the Guelph area from a number of angles. For me the most exciting part of the conference was the paper "Civic Participation as the Foundation of Inclusion" by Jasma Narayan, a founding member of the Onward Willow program. During the conference and from Jasma's paper I learnt about the Onward Willow: Better Beginnings, Better Futures program and the strong community participation at its heart. I learnt about the incredible diversity in this area of North-West Guelph and the grounded ways community leaders like Jasma created practical programs to help feed, clothe and assist people living in this economically and socially disadvantaged area. I became interested in working with this group and had

begun talking with organisers. It soon became obvious that my mentor in ICASP, Ellen Waterman, was already in process for developing a creative programme linking University of Guelph students with users of the community facilities at Onward Willow. We realised that together we could develop a project that crossed over her experience as musician and university music faculty with my background working with theatre and performance with community groups. We were to work with the teen drop-in project, a group of young people who met socially at the Family Gateway centre on Friday nights to use the centre's resources and who would occasionally be offered structured group activities at the centre. This group reflected the diversity and economic challenges typical of this area.

PLAYING ACROSS DISCIPLINES: PREPARING IMPROVISATION WORKSHOPS

Looking back at the process of developing the program and working with the students, I feel the process emphasised some particular qualities of improvisation for me.

1. Improvisation across music and theatre shares more basic qualities than I had imagined. Similarities include a focus on: risk, collaboration, spontaneous decision making, a changed idea of the concept of "mistake," listening to and acceptance of suggestions and offers, the exposure and integration of power dynamics in the room, a mix of surprise and fulfilled expectation, skill development and the development of artistic practice outside formal barriers. These are obviously specifically applied in a local context and the language differs greatly between artists and disciplines. It was very interesting to me, for example, when we set a Keith Johnstone text as a class reading which listed some of his perceived improvisation "issues" and suggestions for resolving them, that the music students found it very difficult to see how these could relate to musical improvisation, perhaps due to the language difference in the text. "Accepting and blocking offers," "Hedging," "Wimping," "Lowering the Stakes," "Agreed Activities" etc. as theatre concepts may not clearly translate to free musical improvisation, although I would argue that they are present in both areas of artistic improvisation equally (Johnstone 49-51).

2. Improvisation is both a laboratory and a venue. It became increasingly obvious to me through this project that improvisation in both music and theatre is a laboratory for developing performance skills, but that this skill development occurs simultaneously with performance activity itself. Through the project, I saw all of us grow as performers in numerous ways: 1) we released our physical and vocal inhibitions to increase our flexibility as performers, 2) we increased our understanding and use of stage space and shapes and levels (placement of the body from floor through to standing), 3) we increased our ability to understand the power of group stage images (tableaux) and blocking (movements on stage and exits and entrances), and 4) we enhanced our ability to develop stories and characters by intensifying the signals showing relationship, the formation of close onstage bonds with performers, the development of new ways of communicating subtext and power relations. From the performance side, our skills also included growing an awareness of the shifting audience/performer dynamic, understanding and performing the physical limits and possibilities of bodies and voices,

and undertaking everyday and extraordinary actions based on conceptual instructions in order to find new ways of performing. These skills grow through improvising and are present in improvised theatre and performance.

Through working with Ellen and the music students at the University of Guelph, I saw that the musical side of improvisation also tests the limits and possibilities of body and instrument in the space and with the other performers and also works with musical language, subtext and relationship, although many of the ways this occurs were alien to me. Since I have no musical training, I had particular difficulty with what I saw as static bodies and inaccessible musical vocabularies, and those games that required formal training in vocal production, pitch, or melody. I am sure this occurred in reverse when I asked the music students to participate in exercises based in theatre vocabulary.

The positive clash of our disciplines and the lack of knowledge about Onward Willow, however, continually challenged me, and I think this was one of the successes of the project. At no point could any of us retreat to a shared comfortable background or use our jargon and shorthand; rather, we had to find connections between our experiences and examine them for applicability to a community we knew very little about. As in a training laboratory, many experiments were unmemorable or frustrating but all contributed to the work being done, but as in a performance venue these experiments occurred in view of students, staff, and volunteers, live and always accountable. As distinct, unrepeatable performances, the games do not occur in isolation, in private, as preparation only; instead, they are performances/artistic practices in their own right.

One of the saddest things for me, is that in this process I retreated from the more experimental, physical games I know, despite the fact that these were sometimes the most successful in the past groups I worked with, in favour of games that had a clear shape that I thought could be taught by people with less experience as facilitators. I think I underestimated the students and myself by not teaching some of the non-story based games and exercises such as those arising from mime, Butoh, and 1960s art experiments. The exercises I left out of my repertoire include those which encourage students to explore spaces physically, to experiment with repetition and copying and with extremes of emotion and physicalization, to move collectively and to think about how audiences watch and why. I think my fears came partly from the fact that we had only 5 weeks to develop the workshops, partly from an erroneous idea that the community group we would be working with would contain some aggressive personalities who would respond better to overt game structures, and partly over my fear that experiential, durational, non-linear performance would be hard to incorporate into the games-based structure that Ellen had envisioned for the project. In the future I think that I should push my boundaries further and trust the people with whom I'm working rather than retreat to nice, shaped warm-up or story-based games that I find easy to teach. In the past, these risks have always paid off with communities, taking improvised performance in new directions that I could have never imagined.

PLAYING ACROSS BOUNDARIES AT ONWARD WILLOW

At one meeting with staff at the centre, Ellen and I were told by a senior staff member that the staff are sometimes shorthanded, that there are some behavioural problems among the teens, and that all of us as volunteers would be asked to be another pair of hands to diffuse difficult situations. As a complete outsider to the community, I formed an initial vision of the drop-in program that shaped how I thought of our workshops and our role at the centre. On arrival on the first day, my expectation of aggressive behaviour proved foolish and unfounded. Whilst it was clear, like any community setting relying on volunteer help, that the youth worker probably was understaffed some evenings, there was a strong team of staff, interns, volunteers and more importantly, peer leaders amongst the teenage group on the evenings we attended. I quickly learnt that many of the teenagers had been part of Onward Willow programs from childhood. In my opinion, these teenagers were socialised by their experience in community programs, they were mostly extremely polite, certainly creative, and some were very confident and willing to learn and work in a group. Older teenagers mentored younger ones, and support networks were obvious, particularly surrounding students with special needs. With six University of Guelph students and two staff joining the ranks, there were no unmanageable discipline problems and we were able to learn from each other without any major disruptions. It was a reminder to me that it is dangerous to hold expectations too close because they are likely to be shattered in practice!

Looking back at the process of developing the program, working with the community group and students I have learnt so much about improvising communit(ies) across disciplines.

1. Improvisation as a game. We worked with a group of incredibly culturally diverse 14-18 year old teenagers, including a number of teenagers with developmental disabilities, who were attending a youth drop-in centre that none of us had any connection with. They were attending for fun and entertainment, perhaps, given the background and area, sometimes as babysitting for absent parents, or for access to food and safe environments. Onward Willow brought together very different personalities, cultural backgrounds and artistic disciplines. We were working with the group in a small room with limited resources. We had taken these factors into consideration in our development workshops (for example, by selecting a gender-balanced and diverse group of university student facilitators), and the students had incorporated these conditions into their workshop plans, but the reality of this environment was never “real” until we were “in place”; it is then that the improvisation really began. I began to realise the design of the project was itself a game, a structure we worked inside for different aims and goals, improvising our own responses to the changing situation. Originally, for example, the students planned to hold a brief jam session at the beginning of each workshop in order to attract students into the space. On the first day, however, we found that by the time the students had organized themselves to play, the participants had already assembled in the space and were waiting for us to begin the workshop. Indeed, our idea of holding highly structured two hour sessions shifted when leaders reminded us that it was important for the teenagers to have free time and choice, causing us to revise our workshop plan. During the first half of each workshop we offered structured improvisation games, and during the second half we offered open,

improvised individual music lessons and mini jam sessions that were very successful at engaging teenagers who, staff reported, had not previously become engaged in group activities at Onward Willow. Pairs of our students facilitated each evening, and they found that they had to change or even completely abandon their carefully developed plans in favour of an adaptive, improvisational approach.

In my work at ICASP, this deliberate fluidity of design has been a reoccurring feature of my studies and my practice, important to all art and community work, but vital when the outcome is the development of improvisational practices. It is something I am learning all the time, the ability to let go of long held preconceptions and planning (and a tendency to over plan) and let conditions shape the experience. At Onward Willow, my joy at being back on the rehearsal floor playing with creative young people (my favourite place to be) had to be tempered by the understanding that things needed room for change, for gaps, for different voices, for me to be quiet and back away.

2. Improvisation exposing difference. Working at Onward Willow, I observed that difference seems to rise to the surface in improvisation: ways we assume ourselves to be similar to others are exposed as self delusions, cultural, gendered, economic, family differences become impossible to ignore, personalities become much more present in the creative process. I was constantly aware of my cultural difference as an Australian, new to Canada. I did not understand many of the jokes and cultural references and I knew very little about Guelph geography and culture since I was new both to the university and to the area. I felt alien to the musical world, alien to the cultural context at Onward Willow and distinctly aware of the age gap between the teenagers and students and myself. Why was I so aware of this difference in this context? Why did the cultural, religious, language, personality differences amongst the participants and students seem so distinct (despite the close-knit nature of both the group of teenagers and the class of students and my own feeling of closeness with both groups)? Why did Ellen continually mention that she felt distinctly out of place as an older “grey haired” person in this group of younger people (despite the fact that the age range of staff was quite large)? I wonder if there is something about creating spontaneously that brings our experience out in high relief. It is, after all, in lieu of a score or a script, the only thing we have to work with. These are the fragments we play with when we play improvisation games. These are the differences that need to be incorporated, negotiated, celebrated, questioned. This is not a simple game.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPROVISING AS A GAME WITH STAKES

There are difficulties with “exposing” differences through improvisation projects in communities. One example is the power dynamics between “facilitators” and “participants,” a divide which thankfully did diminish quickly in this group as both groups co-created and played together. This disparity, however, remains in the background as university educated facilitators learn from, and teach, first and second generation immigrant, socially disadvantaged young people for a very short period. The youth gain entertainment and minor skills development. The students in return gain university credit or academic status from this activity, leading to possible further economic gain in

the future. Are the benefits equal? I have seen so many improvising musicians meet each other for the first time five minutes before a gig, play together and walk away, something which rarely happens in theatre and performance. It is easy for me to find this practice alien coming from a background where intense collaboration takes place over a longer period, yet this musical model is also true to the transience, acceptance and risk that are at the heart of improvisation. I wonder how we translate this necessary transience of improvisatory practice into building sustaining relationships which improve the societies we live in. How do we create paths to play across inaccessible boundaries, across borders, across disciplines? How do we make sure this play is happening even on a playing field that we acknowledge will never be level?

I find it difficult to draw any distinct conclusions from my short experience at Onward Willow. I feel privileged to meet such a great bunch of people at the community centre and to see their brilliant community program so successfully playing out in the children it has mentored. I am thankful to the students and to Ellen for allowing me to join them, for incorporating my background and experience into their project and for the chance to learn from these creative artists and from those creative artists of all ages working down at Onward Willow, and for the chance to be back on the floor seeing imaginative improvisation develop in front of my eyes. I am aware I retreated from taking big risks with this project and I hope I can be braver in the future. What I will take away is the urgent need to remember and accept the experimental nature of improvisation, to not forget in the warmth of working in close knit communities that the practice we love is difficult, risky and must remain so. It is in this crucial work with communities as partners that I think we can find the real, local and specific benefits to this continual, inspiring “game” we play together.

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