Some Guiding Questions

On December 16 and 17, 2009, the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) project (with support from one of our partners, the Musagetes Foundation) will be bringing together representatives from our outreach partners along with other stakeholders, researchers, or experts to start work on our improvisation and pedagogy policy paper. We will use as our point of departure (1) ways to influence curriculum reform with the aim of integrating improvisational activities more fully into music education and community-based arts programs and (2) the issue of itinerant/institutional partnerships in music programming/education for disadvantaged or underserviced populations. In particular, we'll seek to advance discussion around one of our key research questions in the pedagogy area: what new theoretical and organizational models and practices can be developed for the creation and nurturing of itinerant-institutional partnerships for the teaching of improvisation, the development of teachers of improvisation, and theories of education that embed improvisation itself as a methodology?

Part of the first day of meetings will be devoted to hearing from these partners and stakeholders (all our outreach partners have been asked to respond to a set of questions prepared by ICASP outreach coordinator Julie Smith); the second day will be a focused and facilitated meeting among interested researchers (ICASP pedagogy policy paper subgroup) to begin to draft an outline of the policy paper on this area.

What follows are a series of quotations from community-based arts activists and academics[i] that are representative of larger discourses or issues relating to the promotion of improvisation in pedagogy. Following these quotes are a series of questions intended to promote and guide discussion over the next two days.

Improvisation as Service:
Discussing the value of arts-based communities, Amalia Mesa-Bains[ii] argues "Art is a different form of service. Students have to have the ability to reflect and analyze, and they have to develop what we think of now as a set of lifelong skills, and those lifelong skills of social justice and service go out with them into the world."
  ➢ What forms of service can we associate with improvisation?
  ➢ What lifelong skills can we associate with improvisation?
  ➢ How can we foster and communicate improvisation's ability to reflect and analyze? Moreover, what are the semantics of addressing this aspect of improvisation in an institutional framework?

Negotiating Specific Instances versus Institutional Concerns of Improvisation:
Stressing the importance of forging relations with the communities and organizations academics address in the promotion of social change, Marcel Diallo[iii] argues "So, the first thing is not to come in on some missionary stuff, you understand what I'm saying? Because I can't stand missionaries. I view that as just neo-colonialism at its finest. You're coming right back in to instill the principles and the mores of the dominant society, whether you see it or not."
  ➢ How can we avoid setting up a "missionary" dynamic in relations with disenfranchised communities?

- How can we talk about these relationships without setting up a power dynamic that places authority -- rhetorical, practical, or otherwise -- with academics and institutions?
- How do we negotiate the specificity of a community with the more generalized lens of an institution, especially if that institution is using the contact between communities as part of a research project? Does this dynamic necessarily put in play a dynamic where a docent or observer is needed? If not, how do we leave enough space for specific instances of improvisation and yet support these communities?

Forming and Speaking about Alliances:
Addressing the legacy of community-based art encounters, Claudine K. Brown[iv] poses a number of thought-provoking questions. She asks, "After someone comes to a program that you have designed and he or she has had a great experience, then what? Are we doing this work to create a memorable first encounter or are we doing it for long-term impact? What should happen as a result of these encounters? […] How do we grow this field and make sure that the experiences that we value are not just our own, but experiences that others can share throughout our society?"
- What form of alliances are we hoping to forge in contacts with various communities and institutions?
- Why are these alliances being promoted?
- How do we promote these alliances?
- How do we propagate further encounters?

Guidelines for Formalizing Improvisation:
Outlining a number of values and attitudes that are necessary to promoting productive dialogue between institutions and communities, Amalia Mesa-Bains argues that "Adapting to change is also critical as a guiding principle, because the project will change[;] nothing you do can stop it. And this last one is for all those art schools that are on the way to doing this: You have to challenge your own institution. You have to challenge the premises, the ways of working, and the unspoken and assumed privileges."
- How can we maintain the flexibility of improvisation and the questioning of assumed privileges Bains argues is necessary to successful community-facing projects?
- This question becomes especially important when given under the lens of promoting curriculum changes. What do we lose if improvisation becomes fixed as part of the curriculum? How can we simultaneously formalize the aims of social change, community, and improvisation and yet not fix the mandates to outcomes alone?
- Is there a need for guidelines? What would these guidelines promote and what would they limit?

Next steps:
Short-term goals:
- Approach John Kissick (Director, School of Fine Art and Music), Richard Kurth (Director, UBC School of Music), and Don McLean (Dean, Schulich School of Music of McGill University) about instituting formalized Improvisation classes in their course-offerings.
- Approach the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts for funding with which to promote alliances between improvisation-based outreach organizations and public schools in their area.
- Develop a working definition of improvisation and description of our goals that will promote more alliances.

Long-term goals:
- Creation of an interdisciplinary graduate programme in Critical Studies in Improvisation.
- Create a database for teacher resources that address improvisation as a tool for social practice.

Things to consider:

> ➢ What are the first steps?
> ➢ What is the timeframe we expect/hope for?
> ➢ What further steps can we take to support policy workers and promote more research on the role of improvisation in community-facing organizations and schools?

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[i] Each of the scholars mentioned here were Keynote speakers at the conference, "Crafting a Vision for Art,Equity and Civic Engagement: Convening the Community Arts Field in Higher Education" at the Center for Art and Public Life at the California College of the Arts.

[ii] Dr. Amalia Mesa Bains is the Director of the Visual and Public Art Institute of California State University at Monterey Bay.

[iii] Marcel Diallo is the Chief Creative Officer of Black Dot Artists, Inc., Oakland, California.

[iv] Claudine K. Brown is the Director of the Arts and Culture Program, Nathan Cummings Foundation New York, New York.