

Improvisational Etiquette, the Community Environmental Leadership Program, and Valuing Voice within the Classroom

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Every classroom – elementary, high school and otherwise – has its own built-in student hierarchy. Typically, the lion’s share of the teacher’s attention goes to the extroverts, the loudest and most charismatic voices keen to share their ideas with no additional prodding necessary. Unfortunately, after the most dominant voices have said their piece, there often isn’t any time or space for the quieter, more subdued voices to be heard equally within the classroom. This inequality is only further compounded by narrow timeframes within a high school setting, where teachers must navigate a pre-determined curricular path within a very limited amount of time.

Much of the same could be said about the internal band dynamics of larger jazz ensembles, where there exists a hierarchy of dominant and less dominant musicians. Yet, for a successful, improvised piece, there needs to be an equal sharing of musical roles within the framework of a song or jam session. Howard Becker claims that there is an unwritten code of “etiquette” that musicians tacitly follow, which affords reasonably equal time and space for their unique voices (Becker, 2000). This code of improvisational etiquette sets a kind of precedent that ensures each player “courteously” listens to her/his fellow musicians and contributes in such a way that s/he does not dominate or impose any single idea on the collective (Becker, 2000). Jazz itself has been described as “putting an emphasis on personal freedom but at the service of group conception” (Stewart, 2004). So it becomes essential that within the context of an improvised jam, the players do not play something that clashes with their fellow musicians or pre-empts what they are playing (Cameron, 1954).

The Community Environmental Leadership Program (CELP) was founded in 1994 by the late Michael Elrick, a teacher at Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute in Guelph, Ontario. CELP was originally designed as a for-credit, multidisciplinary learning experience for grade ten students to learn about becoming stewards of the environment (“CELP for grade tens,” 2010). The program takes place almost entirely outside of the classroom for an entire semester at Camp Edgewood in the small, rural community of Eden Mills, Ontario (“CELP for grade tens,” 2010).

Despite the program’s main environmental education component, one of its principal instructors, Joel Barr, a history teacher at Centennial C.V.I., claims that the true value behind CELP is that it provides a learning environment that knocks down social barriers and creates an environment where each individual student’s voice is valued and listened to equally. “For me I think that’s the tremendous value [of CELP]: getting different voices valued within a group. And valued means they’re not tolerated, but they’re respected and listened to,” says Barr (“Interview”).

There are only 24 students within each CELP group, which encourages a much more intimate and open relationship among the students as they learn – and teach! – together over a six month period. For a period during the semester, the grade ten students, working in pairs, are put in charge of teaching an environmental science course to several groups of grade five students. The course, called *Earthkeepers*, takes place over a month on a three-day rotating basis. At first, Barr and the other instructors demonstrate and model the course for the grade tens, covering the basic curriculum and possible teaching approaches that can be taken. Then the grade ten students are essentially left to teach their grade five students the *Earthkeepers* course content in whatever manner they choose. Some of Barr’s students teach the course material in a loud, energetic style, while others may take a more subdued or quirky approach to their teaching styles.

Over the course of the term, says Barr, the students come to admire the different characteristics, humour and knowledge that each of their classmates brings to their sessions with the younger students. Similarly, musicians performing in large jazz ensembles are constantly attempting to strike a balance between their own musical expression during solos, on the one hand, and maintaining a cohesive group sound, on the other. Bandleader Duke Ellington describes this relationship as “...an attempt to achieve a form of individual expressiveness presented by the entire band, both as individuals and as a whole” (Stewart, 2004).

The defining moment of each session, according to Barr, is when the quiet, more introverted or insecure students gradually undergo a dramatic transformation and eventually take charge of the classroom. Yet, it is this respect of individuality and this emergence of new voices – solo spots in a sense – which build a sense of community within the CELP group. “Everyone sees that they’ve passed this incredible test of teaching these grade fives and everybody’s got their own value,” explains Barr. “And so you get this improv. where they make a group project where all voices are coming in at an equal level” (“Interview”).

Yet, Barr is quick to admit that as a teacher in a typical classroom setting, it is often easiest for him to rely on the more dominant, louder students to carry class discussion forward in order to cover the required material. While he is able to cover the necessary ground, this reliance on the more dominant voices gives the rest of the class an excuse to disengage from their learning. CELP gives the students time and space to engage with the ideas and material they encounter and for the less dominant voices to finally be heard through careful group reflection and decision-making. “In taking the time, we then force ourselves not to [only] listen to the dominant voices and we give rise to the other ones or we encourage the other ones to be heard

and create scenarios where we take the dominant voice out of the situation to force others to come up and speak,” explains Barr. “By the end we’ve got potentially twenty four voices that want to chip in something and you get that different piece at the end” (“Interview”).

This unique, unrepeatable class chemistry comes from what some improvising musicians calls a “special energy” that comes from the anticipation of the unexpected and the unrepeatable within the mutual bonds they form with each other over the course of a jam session (Kisliuk, 1988). These jamming, improvising musicians, just like Barr’s CELP students, fuse ethics and musical aesthetics in order to interact with each other and reach a “heightened musical and social communion” (Kisliuk, 1988). Barr too, relates the collaborative classroom experience in terms of a band dynamic: “You’re not the third violin who gets to play only these notes over here because that’s what you’re holding down to make the greater piece in an orchestra: everybody has an equal chance to come in and say what they have and nobody owns that” (“Interview”).

If it is to be a place of collaboration and of freedom in learning, a classroom or learning environment of any type cannot become the sole property of the loudest minority. Rather, it must become a collective learning experience where the individual voice is respected and valued but these individual voices build towards a collective, more profound learning experience for all. The codes of “improvisational etiquette” followed within bands and ensembles illustrate just this principle. No one musician asserts complete ownership over an improvised piece. Rather, both student interaction and improvised musical practices require a certain care and attentiveness – “a willingness to give ground and take direction from each other...granting equal status to everyone’s ideas and intuitions” (Becker, 2000).

CELP encourages students to value and find their voices within the classroom and then use those voices as instruments for creating a completely unique and fulfilling learning

experience for the class as a whole. What the grade tens learn about their own voices extends far beyond CELP and well into their own social communities outside of the CELP program and their school. These students are able to leave the program with a more concrete sense of where their strengths lie. They build positive communities that speak for themselves, develop their own sets of values, and become active agents for positive change.

Works Cited

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