

The Improvisation Community and Social Practice Research Project: Some Thoughts on Outreach, Partnership, and Policy

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1. Introduction

Thanks very much for the invitation. We're pleased to be here. We'd like to use our duo talk today as an opportunity to give you a brief overview of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) research project. We'll tell you a little about the project's scope and context, about some of our key research goals, and, given this conference's "Partnering Diversity" theme, we thought we'd give particular attention, via three key areas of inquiry (outreach, partnerships, and policy) to our understanding of the significant intervention that improvisation, as a social practice, might make into the ways we understand issues of diversity. And here, we want to think beyond our roles as creative artists in a professional arts milieu, to provoke some discussion about the wider roles that the creative arts could play in Canadian society. But first, and by way of introduction, we'd like to play you a short (6 minute) video about the project. (See www.improvcommunity.ca)

2. Scope and Context

Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) is a 4.3 million dollar collaborative research project generously supported for 7 years by SSHRC's prestigious Major Collaborative Research Initiative program. Centered at the University of Guelph (and in partnership with McGill University, the University of British Columbia, and Université de Montreal), it brings together a dynamic international research team of 35

scholars from 20 different institutions to study the social implications of improvised musical practices, and it fosters innovative partnerships with numerous community-based organizations (including major institutions such as the Canada Council for the Arts and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, presenters such as the Guelph Jazz Festival, state-of-the-art research and documentation centres such as the Daniel Langlois Foundation, and street level service organizations such as KidsAbility Centre for Child Development). Outcomes will range across a wide spectrum of electronic, broadcast, and print media, with a focus on policy-oriented and community-facing impacts. The project will have a significant effect on how research is done and how its results are implemented and disseminated, both within and beyond the academy. In addition to public discourse and scholarly publication, our work highlights collaboration with international arts presenters, educators, street-level organizations, and policy makers to ensure the broadest possible impact on Canadian society.

The idea for the ICASP project comes in large measure out of the research and outreach activities associated with the Guelph Jazz Festival. As a regular part of the festival's schedule of events, and for over a decade, we've been running what is now an annual three-day international conference: it's the only ongoing scholarly event of its kind to be linked to a North American jazz festival, and it has been bringing together scholars, creative practitioners, and audiences for vibrant and inspired critical exchanges. An event that has innovatively cut across a wide range of social and institutional locations, our annual conference has already fostered an impressive record of publication including two scholarly books and numerous published articles while also serving as something of an important training ground for young scholars and a meeting place for well established

international researchers. Indeed, the work associated with the conference (the talks and panel discussions, the published papers, and, perhaps most importantly, the creation of a highly integrated and diverse network of international scholars and artists) has done much to shape and to define the emerging discipline of critical studies in improvisation. And it has shown us just how much interest and excitement there is in this emerging field. In fact, this work has created a climate of genuine intellectual excitement and innovation, and has led to the formation of the international research project we're discussing with you today. And now, as part of the ICASP project, we're running satellite conferences in Montreal, Vancouver, and most recently have inspired a similar project in Paris, using the Guelph model of partnerships between festivals and universities.

3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The ICASP project's core hypothesis is that musical improvisation is a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action. Taking as a point of departure performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, we argue that the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. Improvisation, in short, has much to tell us about the ways in which communities based on such forms are politically and materially pertinent to envisioning and sounding alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Improvisation demands shared responsibility for participation in community, an ability to negotiate differences, and a willingness to accept the challenges of risk and contingency.

Furthermore, in an era when diverse peoples and communities of interest struggle to forge historically new forms of affiliation across cultural divides, the participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect, and community-building inculcated through improvisatory practices take on a particular urgency.

We believe that there is much to be learned from performance practices that accent dialogue, collaboration, inventive flexibility, and creative risk-taking, much to be learned from art forms that disrupt orthodox standards of coherence, judgement, and value with a spirit of experimentation and innovation. Our broadly-based team of researchers and community partners is particularly well-positioned to take on such work. With expertise in critical, literary, historical, musical, sociological, anthropological, technological, and philosophical inquiry, policy-oriented social research, law, and creative response, our team is addressing pressing issues of social and cultural transformation: human rights, transculturalism, pedagogy, intellectual property rights, the civic participation of aggrieved populations, the role of creativity in powering economic growth--issues central to the challenges of diversity and social cooperation in Canada.

To what extent, and in what ways, then, might improvised creative practice foster a commitment to cultural listening, to a widening of the scope of community, and to new relations of trust and social obligation? What role does improvisation play in facilitating global and transcultural conversations, and how (and to what extent) are diverse identities, cultures, and viewpoints being brought together through improvisational music-making? How do artistic and social practices get transformed as they move across cultures? What can improvisation tell us about how communities get organized, how identities get formulated? How do the kinds of cultural (and pedagogical) institutions that

present and promote improvised music shape our understanding of public culture, of memory, of history? These are among some of the key research questions we are exploring through the ICASP project.

4. Outreach

From the beginning, we've been concerned to reach beyond the academy into other communities, and to redefine the nature of "research". Instead of "research on" we have adopted a model of "research with" a diverse range of participants that is consistent with the goals of community music. As Constantijn Koopman suggests: "Being flexible both musically and socially, community music does not require people to accommodate to some pre-existing format. It can devise tailor-made programmes addressing the needs and preferences of specific groups" (154). If we imagine improvisation as a form of community music, then our focus becomes one of widening and diversifying the community of available participants. One of the most potent questions we can then ask as musicians is: "who gets to participate?"

For the past two summers, we have worked with creative improvisers (Rich Marsella and Matana Roberts in 2008, and Jane Bunnett and Larry Kramer in 2009) to develop workshops with a group of special needs children at KidsAbility, a community-based program structured around providing children and teens with developmental, physical, and communication disabilities, with educational, physical, and social support. The "Play Who You Are" workshops bring a group of 10 to 15 kids together with artist/teachers who work with the kids over several sessions to produce a concert at the Guelph Jazz Festival. It's a challenge! As Rich Marsella noted, "all my ideas were

flushed down the toilet” - working with these kids (and their quite diverse circumstances and conditions) meant adapting his entire repertoire of workshop techniques. The musicians must carefully listen to feedback from staff, parents, and volunteers in addition to working directly with the participants (many of whom are non-verbal). The focus is on adapting musical means to allow the most direct participation by each child, whatever his or her challenges, tastes, and aptitudes might be.

One of our researchers, Pauline Oliveros, has further developed the connection between improvisation and diversity through her ground breaking work on adaptive use musical instruments for the physically challenged: a computer/camera tracking technology for musicking that extends the possibilities of creative improvisation among and across people with a wider range of bodies, mobilities, and sensory experience. Working with an occupational therapist and a technical team, Oliveros developed a non-intrusive virtual instrument designed for people with cerebral palsy and other motor/neural conditions who have almost no voluntary mobility and who cannot speak. The instrument is specifically designed to be improvisational – it enables users to interact directly with other musicians, and it encourages a wide variety of creative choices that can be accessed in the moment. With the help of this instrument, formerly silenced bodies become expressive, improvising bodies. Leaf Miller, an occupational therapist who is also an improvisational drummer, is one of the key researchers in this work. Miller makes a whole-body connection between musical creation and physical and mental functions; in my experience, her improvisational encounters with these children result in nuanced and expressive musicking.

Working with Oliveros and Miller, we are exploring ways in which adaptive use

instruments explode our concepts of “talented,” “expressive,” “proficient,” and “creative” bodies in music. We are challenged to re-imagine not only the musical body, but musical research: How do we avoid pathologizing the musical activities of the physically and mentally challenged, and what does it mean to conduct “research” with those who cannot speak for themselves?

One of our Vancouver-based outreach projects is looking at an existing improvisation group: the Carnegie Jazz Band. Trombonist Brad Muirhead has been working for several years now with a wide variety of musicians through his jazz band class at the legendary Carnegie Centre that serves the diverse population of Vancouver’s downtown eastside. One of our graduate research assistants, Tegan Ceschi-Smith, is looking at the impact of creative improvisation as a means for expression in a group that includes the homeless, the addicted, and those with multiple social/emotional/physical and mental challenges. A vital aspect of Ceschi-Smith’s work is playing violin in the band, and she understands both Muirhead and the other musicians as co-participants in the research. Improvisation as both a research model and a subject of inquiry calls us to listen deeply for diversity of expression, and moreover to join in the musicking--to participate in the dialogue--in a spirit of community building and sharing.

5. Partnerships

One of the most exciting things about the work we're doing with ICASP is the degree to which we have succeeded in forging innovative partnerships with the larger community, and we note that this is neither an easy nor a common accomplishment in humanities-related research. With our project, we seek to develop mutually supportive partnerships in

ways that will highlight how community, arts-based, and university research and education can purposefully support one another. Our partners represent many of the most vital participants in the cultivation and perpetuation of communities of arts and creative improvised music in Canada. And our partnerships include collaboration on the hosting of colloquia, the media dissemination of vital outputs from project research, and the promotion of research on improvisation well beyond its traditional existing constituencies (for a list of our current partners, please see the handout we've distributed). Through activities such as these, we will continue to establish and strengthen ties between musicians, audiences, and the local communities within which they function; and researchers who work to contextualize and articulate the vital implications of musical improvisation within culture at large.

Of particular interest in the context of the current forum are the partnerships we've established between university researchers, music festivals, and community-based street level social service organizations such as those described by Ellen in our discussion of outreach. Through these partnerships, as you've heard, we've put improvising musicians in direct and meaningful contact with marginalized people. The benefits of such partnerships, we would like to suggest, are many: they serve to break down silos, to bridge gaps, and to enable different kinds of organizations to come together, to engage in a productive process of knowledge-exchange. Moreover, they've played a key role in broadening and diversifying the methodological and disciplinary expertise of our research team to enable us to see beyond the assumptions and perspectives associated with our home disciplines. Indeed, we've seen first hand what happens when people from diverse sectors come together, how they learn from and challenge one another in productive and

inspiring ways. Such a broadening is akin to what Hank Rubin, in his book

Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships in Communities and

Schools, calls moving beyond a “toolbox” mentality:

In the fields of education, social services, health care, and the arts, collaboration offers the advantage of moving beyond our toolbox mentality: a mentality that has us building the capacities of our organizations in order to accomplish their specific missions by identifying and mastering a prescribed set of tools we think our missions demand Collaborations not only add tools to the toolbox, they add diversity to the perspectives, broaden our understanding of the problems, and multiply the stakeholders with vested interest in seeing that our mission-driven goals are met. (10)

One of our research team members, George Lipsitz, makes a related observation. He tells us that “Those of us who work, teach, and study as ‘traditional intellectuals’ in institutions of higher learning have an important role to play in analyzing and interpreting the changes that are taking place around us. But we need,” he insists, “to develop forms of academic criticism capable of comprehending the theorizing being done at the grassroots level by artists and their audiences, of building bridges between different kinds of theory.” Our project takes seriously this insistence on building such bridges, on learning from artists and from grassroots organizations, on forging innovative partnerships between scholars, creative practitioners, arts presenters, and street level community-based organizations. While dominant methodological paradigms in the arts have typically been characterized by a separation between theory and practice, our project recognizes the extent to which improvised music-making offers a resonant model for a marriage of the two, and for addressing broad critical, social, cultural, and intellectual issues from a diverse range of perspectives. And part of what’s at issue here

is the need to increase and diversify the base of valued knowledges, to enable understanding of a diversity of educational principles and sources of knowledge. Using improvisation as a pedagogical model in these communities, in other words, allows creative practitioners to tap into principles of learning that come out of diverse communities that have not historically been valued. (Last year, for example, as part of Black History month, we brought African American vocalist Dean Bowman and African Canadian / Chinese Canadian pianist D.D. Jackson into a very homogenous community, an old order Mennonite school, to lead a series of workshops on improvisation, spirituals, and gospel, which culminated in a performance with the students and the visiting artists.)

Our case studies show us that inclusivity and diversity, indeed, are two key aspects of improvisatory musical practices that may very well be different from more traditional models of music-making or institutionalized music pedagogy. Because improvisation as we conceive it need not be predicated on specific genres, and because it figures in the music of so many world cultures – we think that improvisation is a powerful tool for connecting people. And when people from diverse (and especially marginalized) communities (such as those we've discussed in relation to our outreach projects) don't feel that traditional musical (or educational) institutions speak to them, improvisation may have the potential to build bridges, model new ways of speaking and collaborating, bring more people to "the table."

Experience and theory alike have shown us that the communities in which we've been working have a great deal of capacity, that there is, indeed, significant (if often untapped) creative energy among members of aggrieved and marginalized populations. Unfortunately, however, as so many of the participants we have interviewed have also

made clear, these communities are often short on resources. Institutions (like universities), on the other hand, have resources, and they can also provide an ability to track larger trends and bigger-picture issues. How, then, might we use our partnerships to tap into existing institutions and turn them into resources for change and transformation? This question informs one of the key areas where we hope, through our project, to make some useful policy interventions.

6. Policy

We'd like to end our presentation today by reviewing the conference description for this year's Canadian New Music Network forum. It tells us that

The environment for creative concert music has changed radically in the past 25 years. New practices, new cultures, new partners — the scope of musical activity in Canada is truly astonishing. But how have these new practices, cultures and partners integrated into existing structures, into existing musical traditions? What are the benefits? What are the challenges? How can we create a strong, open and positive climate for real musical dialogue among the many cultural partners that make up the Canadian new music landscape?
<http://www.newmusicnetwork.ca/forum2010.e/>

We're in agreement that there is an astonishing diversity of musical activity in Canada, but we wonder whether our traditional models—our existing structures and traditions—are really equipped to take on the challenge of honouring diversity? Does diversity simply mean a proliferation of acceptable genres of professional music making? That comes with an implicit (and sometimes explicit!) anxiety: we must divide a finite funding pie into more and smaller pieces. That is, if we accept that the imperative of diversity is “integration” into an existing norm.

What kind of paradigm shift would it take, we wonder, to really take on the idea of

diversity in all its many manifestations? What kinds of policies (of arts funding and education for example) would we need to implement such a vision? As arts workers, are we prepared to examine, and possibly change, our existing structures (and our assumptions about what diversity means) so that more people's creative expressions may "count"?

Works Cited

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