

# Opening Minds Through Improvisation

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Improvisation: “where everything might happen but not anything goes.”<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I advocate the practice of free and collective improvisation in efforts to cultivate the opening of minds in classrooms. I do so by forging conceptual connections between improvisation and the “openness” required by open-mindedness. I explore how open-mindedness is generally conceived, including the openness entailed in these conceptions. I then lay out the distinctive features of improvisation and the processes improvisers engage in. I conclude by connecting these features and processes to the openness required by open-mindedness. To be clear: I do not claim that improvisation cultivates open-mindedness. My specific argument is that free and collective improvisation requires an *opening* of its players, the sort of opening relevant for those of us concerned with cultivating open-mindedness in classrooms.

## OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Scholars such as William Hare, Jason Baehr, and Hugh Sockett have been exploring the nature and educational value of open-mindedness since the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Open-mindedness, as they explain it, is an intellectual virtue that disposes us to value and seek truth by taking a particular stance toward what we know and processing new information in particular ways. On the margins of its general acceptance as a valuable educational aim in a liberal democracy, several debates about open-mindedness have taken place. Questions about the limits of open-mindedness, its status as an intellectual virtue, and whether it should be subsumed under Harvey Siegel’s “critical spirit” have sharpened our understanding but have not diminished the fundamental recognition that to be disposed to be open-minded (within fairly wide limits) is an intellectual and educational good in a liberal democracy and, moreover, that schools are appropriate places to cultivate this good.

The nature of open-mindedness is more contested. Following John Dewey, Hare proposes thinking about open-mindedness in terms of three interlocking and complementary components: (1) openness to new ideas, (2) critical assessment of these new ideas, and (3) a willingness and eagerness to revise one’s beliefs in the face of evidence.<sup>3</sup> Each component is necessary, and each compensates for the weaknesses and excesses of the others. Hare sees open-mindedness as relevant for situations in which there are at least two competing beliefs. In one situation, the inquirer is neutral to the beliefs. In the other, the inquirer holds a belief and is confronted with a new or alternative belief.

Jason Baehr’s work on open-mindedness adds to these situations that of a detective trying to make sense of disparate clues (for example, Sherlock Holmes) and that of trying to understand something that requires a paradigm shift in thinking.<sup>4</sup> Because these two situations do not necessarily involve the sort of critical analysis

and judgment required by Hare's conception, Baehr defines open-mindedness more capaciously. He writes that the open-minded person is "characteristically willing and (within limits) able to transcend a default cognitive standpoint in order to take up or take seriously the merits of a distinct cognitive standpoint."<sup>5</sup> The idea of taking up or taking seriously the merits of a distinct cognitive standpoint resonates with the openness of Hare and Dewey.

When considering cultivating open-mindedness in schools, most theorists neglect to analyze this openness. Instead, they focus on developing critical reasoning skills and shaping contexts in which open-mindedness can flourish. More needs to be said about openness in light of significant obstacles to its development, especially the obstacles of strong and committed beliefs and limitations on human perception, such as cognitive biases and perceptual blindness. These obstacles work outside conscious awareness and control, and function to narrow, distort, divert or close off openness. These prereflective and preconscious limitations can transform searches for truth into exercises of belief confirmation. Paying attention to *opening* minds acknowledges these obstacles and attempts to minimize them.

#### OPENNESS

Elsewhere, I have proposed thinking about openness in terms of John Dewey's analysis of perception and recognition.<sup>6</sup> Dewey illustrates the difference between the two with an example of meeting a man on the street: "We *recognize* a man on the street in order to greet or to avoid him, not so as to see him for the sake of seeing what is there." In recognition, we attach a label to sensory information so that we can move toward fulfilling a purpose outside the seeing or perceiving of the situation, person or object. On the other hand, in perceiving the man, we see him in a "pregnant sense. We now begin to study and to 'take in.' Perception replaces bare recognition. [In perception], there is an act of reconstructive doing, and consciousness becomes fresh and alive." The receptivity involved in Dewey's perception is active, a "taking in" as well as a "going-out of energy."<sup>7</sup> Perception actively, receptively, and consciously opens us to a person, an object or an idea.

Dewey's notion of perception, however, is a thin start for conceptualizing an openness that can support specific curricular recommendations. It primarily focuses on receptivity, as he discusses perception in the context of "taking in" art — of viewing and experiencing the art of others. To flesh out this conception, I turn to *making* art, in particular, to improvising.

#### IMPROVISATION

When we think of improvisation, we typically think of something spontaneous, extemporaneous, creative, and inventive. In the arts, musicians think of Dizzy Gillespie and the Grateful Dead. Actors think of Second City and the Groundlings. Dancers think of contact improvisation. Some of us think of the work of contestants on reality television shows such as Project Runway and Iron Chef. However ubiquitous improvisation in the arts may be, capturing and describing its characteristics presents difficulties. Guitarist and a leader of the free improvisation movement, Derek Bailey, warns that "improvisation is ... too elusive for analysis and precise description; essentially non-academic.... And, more than that, any attempt to describe

improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.”<sup>8</sup> Analyzing the ephemeral and fleeting nature of improvisation presents serious challenges.

On the other hand, when Bailey says that “diversity is [improvisation’s] most consistent characteristic,” he is referring to what is produced, not the environment in which it is created, or the practices of the improviser.<sup>9</sup> The creative space and processes of improvisation in the arts share certain describable characteristics. These characteristics reside not in the artworks produced, but in their location and formation. And so, although an academic exploration of improvisation may not help us *practice* improvisation, it can help us advocate its practice in classrooms.

Toward this end, I explore free and collective improvisation. The term “free improvisation” in music refers to the sort of improvisation that doesn’t preclude or prescribe any particular musical form or tradition. Free improvisation is different from jazz improvisation or improvised Shakespeare. Although free improvisation works within constraints, it does not work within a particular form or belong to a particular tradition other than its own. We can find comparable practices in theater and dance, although we won’t find the word free describing them. In contact improvisation, dancers remain in bodily contact while moving without music. In theater, actors improvise from suggestions from the crowd, and so on. Free improvisers work in a space with nothing other than themselves and their instruments — musical, bodily, and vocal. Below, I describe the features and process of successful improvisation that works with more than one person and without rehearsal, scripts, scores, dance notation, and (usually) without direction and conducting.

#### IMPROVISATION AS DISRUPTION

Keith Johnstone, a pioneer in theatrical improvisation, crafted a technique he calls “tilting.” An improviser tilts a scene when she reframes the context of the scene or changes the status of the players in the scene. He provides a number of examples that include the following: a scene begins with two people on a honeymoon, and one spouse introduces a valet whom he has hired to perform sex for him. Or, a scene opens with a player hunting for mimes, and a second player uses mime to trap the hunter.<sup>10</sup> Tilting disrupts the balance of a scene (called a platform) so as to advance the scene. Johnstone tells us that “frightened improvisers keep restoring the balance for fear that something might happen.”<sup>11</sup> Tilting, on the other hand, undermines this natural desire for recovery, for equilibrium. It helps create a space where everything might happen.

Musician Hugh Davies describes a similar technique in musical improvisation. He recalls a time when one of his trusted improvisational partners “began to play extremely high notes on his soprano saxophone, fairly fast figuration within a small pitch-range, very intense and clearly quite an effort to maintain. I knew that he was expecting another musician to join him up there — musically speaking it was almost as if he was asking one of us to do so.”<sup>12</sup> Davies was the only musician available at the time, yet instead of joining immediately, he waited until his partner had nearly given up. Davies explains that he did this to create musical tension that moved the

improvisation forward. Bailey, who documented the experiences of Davies and other improvisers, noticed this to be a pattern and called it “mutual subversion.”<sup>13</sup>

Philosophers working on improvisation have names for this characteristic feature as well. Gary Peters calls it “interrupting the given”<sup>14</sup> and “unfixing.”<sup>15</sup> Panagiotis Kannelopoulos calls it “unsettling certainties.”<sup>16</sup> Through intentional disruptive actions, improvisers work to block the emergence of habitual responses in themselves and others. They create a space filled with destabilizing forces. And, in doing so, they open themselves, their partners and their art to an unpredictable and contingent future.

#### IMPROVISATION AS BEGINNINGS

A significant difference between improvising and performing a composition, whether it be a Rolling Stones song, a George Balanchine ballet, or a David Mamet play, is that, in performing a composition, the artist has an end in mind and faces significant constraints in reaching that end. The notes and lyrics, the choreography and the dialogue cannot be avoided. In free improvisation, there is no specific end in mind, and there are few constraints on the artist. Although the improviser must make meaningful what has come before, every note, every movement, and every line of dialogue is, in a way, a beginning. Improvisation begins again every moment. Peters characterizes what he calls “preserving the beginning of art” as the central task of the improviser.<sup>17</sup>

In beginning again (and again and again), improvisers simultaneously preserve and destroy the past. Peters explains that free improvisation “invite[s] us to make a transition from a closed conception of the past to one that rethinks it as an endlessly ongoing event or occurrence.”<sup>18</sup> Second City alumna Tina Fey illustrates with an example. She describes a scene in which a player opens with, “Freeze, I have a gun!” Another responds with “The gun I gave you for Christmas! You bastard!”<sup>19</sup> Assuming the first player was engaging in armed robbery, the character and relationship information introduced by the second player in the form of a Christmas-gift gun preserves the stick-up at the same time that it destroys other presuppositions of the first player. As Johnstone puts it, free improvisers “give [the future] shape by using the past,” but they are not determined by it.<sup>20</sup> In this way, improvisations, in their disruptive and continuous beginnings “provoke an open-endedness.”<sup>21</sup>

A slightly different spin on this feature of improvisation comes from Kanelopoulos. He describes free improvisation as “a site of resistance to fixity and closure.” Every artistic gesture is a “temporary finalization,” one that “co-exists with their fundamental openness.”<sup>22</sup> Improvisers, in beginning again and again, struggle against what Peters describes as “the *work* of art being destroyed by the artwork.”<sup>23</sup> Improvisers focus on process and not product by committing to beginning and resisting closure. They keep themselves and the work open.

#### IMPROVISATION AS LIVING IN THE MOMENT

Improvisers cannot be directed by the future, as essential features of this future are contingent on the present moment. Again, there is no specific end to guide them or toward which they might aim. Johnstone describes the improviser as “a man walking

backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Johnstone overstates; the improviser knows the general shape and borders of the future (that is, the curtain falls at 9 p.m.), but she cannot consider a specific future without compromising and endangering the improvisation.

Nor can the improviser depend on a past that is reoriginating each moment. Improvisers are jammed into a space between a reoriginating past and contingent future. This predicament can only be negotiated if the improviser becomes alive to the present as it unfolds.<sup>25</sup> Viola Spolin, a developer of improvisation as a theatrical art form, tells improvisers that when they live in the present moment, it becomes a “moment of full consciousness, awareness, continuous time, a timeless moment ... with all ... responses awake and alert, ready to guide you and come to your aid, free of past *do’s and don’ts, should I or shouldn’t I*. In present time a path is opened ... allowing you ... to emerge and experience directly and act freely, present to the moment you are present to.”<sup>26</sup> Being present to the moment you are present to means relinquishing control and your stake in future outcomes. It means moving the need for approval and the fear of disapproval to the background of consciousness.<sup>27</sup> It means tuning all senses to the environment and the others in it. It means no one leads. No one follows. The only aim is the cocreation of an ephemeral aesthetic search in the here and now.

As all performance artists know, living in the moment provides enormous challenges. One of these is that it is not possible to will or focus directly on being present. The nature of living in the moment consists of an open engrossment that moves all else to the periphery of consciousness. Improvisers only recognize having lived in the moment when they are pulled out of it. So what practices of improvisation provide a path into living in the moment in a space characterized by disruption and beginnings? What does an improviser actually *do*?

**IMPROVISERS SEARCH.** Experimental musician Cornelius Cardew echoes other improvisers when he writes that free improvisation is “characterized by enquiry.”<sup>28</sup> He notes that another fundamental difference between free improvisation and composing is that “we are *searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them.”<sup>29</sup> Eddie Prévost, founder of the first free improvisation band, AMM, concurs: “in the improvisational mode the emphasis is upon a creative, investigative approach to an unformulated musical situation.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, “To make [freely improvised] music is to hypothesize, to test every sound.”<sup>31</sup> Both of these artists propose that the *work* of art is to pose problems and search for responses. For musicians, this search, Cardew explains, “is conducted in the medium of sound and the musician himself is at the heart of the experiment.”<sup>32</sup> The dancer searches through contact and movement. Actors search with voices, minds, and bodies. All of these improvisers pose problems and search for responses in a space characterized by disruption and uncertainty.

**IMPROVISERS LISTEN.** Free and collective improvisers also “listen.” They listen with body and mind. They listen to sounds and words, to movement, to touch, to facial cues, to breath, to tone, to energy, to nuance, to smells, to taste, to rhythm, to whatever signals are present in the environment. They direct their attention outward

in order to listen to these signals. Clayton Drinko studied the effects of theatrical improvisation on cognition. Not surprisingly, he found that the sort of listening improvisers engage in enhances their perception: “When all one’s attention is focused on others, cues and clues about their behavior and thought processes become easier to see, interpret, and react to.”<sup>33</sup> The increased ease and speed in listening to (and reading) the environment creates a surprising attunement to other players. The theatrical improvisers Drinko studied describe a convergence in the group’s thinking. Improvisers start to share each other’s thoughts and actions. They discuss being able to finish each other’s sentences and sing the same words in the same moment in an improvised duet. This sort of attunement cannot happen when the improviser’s attention focuses inward. On the contrary, “the more the improviser thinks about her own behavior the less likely she is to intuit other people’s.”<sup>34</sup> Free improvisers listen outward. They *open* themselves to the people and worlds on their stages — continuously taking up and taking seriously what is in their environment. They do so without regard for consequences.

IMPROVISERS SAY “YES, AND. . .” At least two other practices of improvisation contribute to opening, to taking up, to taking seriously, and to living in the moment. The first is saying “yes.” Fey writes,

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. When you’re improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we’re improvising and I say, “Freeze, I have a gun,” and you say, “That’s not a gun. It’s your finger. You’re pointing your finger at me,” our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, “Freeze, I have a gun!” and you say, “The gun I gave you for Christmas! You bastard!” then we have started a scene because we have agreed that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun. Now, obviously in real life you’re not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to “respect what your partner has created” and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that leads.<sup>35</sup>

In musical improvisation, similar practices prevail. Prévost writes, “We hear, and are determined to make sense of what is heard; this is the momentum that trips the music forward.”<sup>36</sup> Musician Jared Burrows agrees: “Whatever sound is produced must be . . . used and developed.”<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Kanellopoulos writes that improvisers are “obliged to surrender to the unfolding music, to strive to create musical meaning and never step out of frame.”<sup>38</sup> The improviser takes up and makes sense of what has been added to the environment, no matter how subversive, disruptive, or unsettling it may be.

Fey’s second rule of improvisation builds on the first, “Say ‘Yes, *and*. . .’” Improvisers “agree” and then add something of their own. Fey illustrates:

If I start a scene with “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah. . .” we’re kind of at a standstill. But if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “What did you expect? We’re in hell.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “Yes, this can’t be good for the wax figures.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we are getting somewhere.<sup>39</sup>

Improvisers take up and take seriously a moment by adding to it. They say “yes, *and*. . .” They do not say “yes,” period. They do not say “yes, but. . .” or “yes, or. . .” They say “yes, *and*. . .” They work to make meaningful what has come before by

making it their own and moving it into the future. These beginnings are not radical departures; “yes, and...” forges continuity even as the past is reoriginated each moment.

Improvisers operate in space characterized by destabilizing forces, contingency, and uncertainty. Every moment is a beginning. Although they operate in a space where everything can happen, it is not a space where anything goes. Improvisers must act in certain ways. In addition to disrupting and resisting closure, improvisers search to make sense of what has come before and what is in their present environment. They do so by living in the moment, listening, and saying, “yes, and...” This space and these practices *open* improvisers in ways that flesh out Dewey’s conception of perception, and align with Hare’s ideas about openness and Baehr’s transcendence of a default cognitive standpoint. Improvisers work to take in, take seriously, and make meaningful whatever is in their environment.

#### OPENNESS RECONSIDERED

This analysis of improvisation suggests that the “openness” of open-mindedness might more productively be considered an embodied practice, a process, and not a state of being or a state of mind. Conceiving of openness as a state of being or mind leads us to think that it can be achieved, and, once achieved, inhabited. If we think of it as an embodied practice, as many Eastern philosophies do, curricular possibilities for cultivating open-mindedness in classrooms shift into view. In this essay, I have proposed one in particular: free and collective improvisation. In both open-mindedness and improvisation, opening destabilizes and unsettles certainties. It searches and resists closure. It preserves and destroys the past. It relinquishes concern for the future. It requires living in present moments shaped by listening to others and attending to the external environment in highly attuned ways. It says “yes, and...” These embodied practices *open* improvisers to take in, take seriously and make meaningful what is out there to be considered.

These practices also invite improvisers to operate prereflectively. In doing so, they provide a possibility for negotiating some of the obstacles that can narrow and distort human perception and thus derail open-mindedness. Jeremy Begbie, working in theological aesthetics, writes that many improvisers “find improvisation worthwhile because ... [among other things] you are ‘taken out of yourself.’ Something happens which so disorients you that, for a time ... your reactions and responses are not what they normally would be.”<sup>40</sup> Charles Limb’s preliminary brain scans of improvising musicians reveal “the absence of central processes that typically mediate self-monitoring and conscious volitional control.”<sup>41</sup> Drinko, relying on this and other empirical work in the neurosciences and psychology, argues that improvisation reorders consciousness. It does this, in part, by suppressing the autobiographical self — the self that, as Antonio Damasio puts it, is present when “the lived past and the anticipated future dominate the proceedings.”<sup>42</sup> Through improvisation, a core consciousness emerges, one that consists of opening to present experience.

#### CONCLUSION

Practicing improvisation does not cultivate open-mindedness. Open-mindedness can require critical assessment and judgment. It can require the imaginative playing

out of consequences of actions. Sometimes it requires the revision of belief or understanding. Improvisation does not cultivate those practices. What improvisation can cultivate, however, is the opening of minds upon which the intellectual virtue of open-mindedness relies. In this essay, I have advocated practicing improvisation in classrooms by examining the features of successful improvisation that resonate with Hare's notion of openness and Baehr's notion of taking up and taking seriously a distinct cognitive standpoint. I have pointed to the work of improvisers within a context of uncertainty and contingency. I have argued that improvisers practice opening by disrupting, resisting closure, living in the moment, searching, listening, and saying "yes, and..." I have proposed that this art does what Jim Garrison tells us that cultural differences can do when we listen — it "throw[s us] into openness."<sup>43</sup> Improvisers throw themselves and their partners open.

Of course, more work needs to be done in seeking a clear conceptual connection between improvisational opening and epistemological opening. It does, however, seem safe at this juncture to propose that Cardew captured something important when he commented that the improviser finds herself at the heart of the improvisational experiment. This sort of experiment can find a home in classrooms of all types, because, as Bailey explains, improvisation "is open to use by almost anyone — beginners, children, and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available. It can be an activity of enormous complexity and sophistication, or the simplest and most direct expression: a lifetime's study and work or a casual dilettante activity."<sup>44</sup> Everyone can improvise. And when we do so, we open our minds and live in spaces where "everything might happen but not anything goes."<sup>45</sup>

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10. Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 356.

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22. Kanellopoulos, "Freedom and Responsibility," 124, 128.
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24. Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 116.
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32. Cardew, "Toward an Ethic of Improvisation."
33. Drinko, *Theatrical Improvisation, Consciousness and Cognition*, 97.
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