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Say Who You Are, Play Who You Are: Improvisation, Pedagogy, and Youth on the Margins

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Introduction

The research presented in this collaboratively-authored paper emerges from a set of community-based outreach activities associated with a large-scale, interdisciplinary project, Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP), which focuses on the social and pedagogical implications of improvised musical practices. Working from the premise that musical improvisation needs to be understood as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action, one of the main goals of this multi-year project is to define a new field of interdisciplinary inquiry. The hope is to have a significant impact on how research is done in this area and how its results are implemented and disseminated, both within and beyond the academy. Through this project—and drawing on creative partnerships with music festivals and community-based social service organizations—we have developed a series of outreach initiatives that place improvising musicians/educators in direct and meaningful contact with aggrieved urban youth. While many research activities within the larger ICASP project are still ongoing, in this paper we highlight a case study methodology to discuss one pilot project that brought improvisation music workshops into an alternative high school classroom. We acknowledge, of course, that improvisation alone will not automatically or always yield socially positive results, and, indeed, our case study shows promising impacts while also highlighting some pitfalls. But, with this qualification in mind, we contend that improvisation as pedagogy has the ability to contribute to urban educational initiatives supporting marginalized youth by beginning to dismantle teacher-student hierarchies, foster self-expression and personal growth, enhance cooperation and collaboration, and encourage deep listening through call and response exercises, all the while contributing to the social

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equity of the group setting.

For the purposes of this paper, our understanding of urban education is informed by Thomas Popkewitz (2008), who argues that recent school reforms in Western education have embraced philosophies of the cosmopolitan or the "urbane," with their emphases on human agency, freedom, empowerment, democracy, diversity, and inclusion. At the same time, he reminds us that these philosophies also involve processes of abjection and the differentiation of disadvantaged populations who do not readily conform to normalized standards of the urbane. He further suggests that "the geographical designation of urban is not about a physical space but a cultural space" (Popkewitz 2008, 167); a claim that aptly characterizes the people in our own case study who live in Guelph, Ontario, a mid-sized town, but who experience both the same kinds of challenges that inner city youth often face (homelessness, teen pregnancy, addiction, and so forth) and the group bonds formed by such teens. Popkewitz's insights, moreover, resonate with many of the claims in the literature on urban education (Fiese and DeCarbo 1995, Hinckley 1995, Leard and Lashua 2006, McClafferty et al., 2000). Building on these insights, we argue that the marginalized youth who participated in our pilot project see themselves as a distinct urban culture rather than as part of a particular geographical locale.

Just as with many urban schools, there are many challenges facing alternative education programs, from limited funding and support, to inadequate space and resources. In addition, the student population itself is rife with challenges, as the students face myriad social, emotional, mental, and physical difficulties, and have often experienced racial or ethnic discrimination, bullying, alienation, low self-esteem, and/or physical, sexual, or mental abuse (Guerin and Denti 1999). Furthermore, these youth are often pathologized as being "on the margins" or "deficient" in some manner, and the "youth-at-risk" discourse often leads to policies which further marginalize the students, and in some cases, even blame them for being "at risk" (te Riele 2006).

Despite such challenges, these schools, and the educational opportunities they provide, are of the utmost importance for the students who attend them, and need "to become a meaningful alternative to traditional public school.…[Indeed], quality alternative education programs should have many of the same high expectations, standards, and outcomes valued in more traditional settings" (Leone and Drakeford 1999, 87). For our project, music education—particularly an in-school music curriculum structured around improvisation

offered in a positive, collaborative, and non-hierarchical way—becomes one such way that alternative education programs can enhance the experiences for their students, and create opportunities to begin to ameliorate some of the personal, social, mental, and emotional issues these youth populations face. It is also clear from our research and experiences within the larger multi-year project[1] that young people see value in creative artistic expression as a way of fostering personal and community growth and cohesion. There is a great deal of creative potential among this marginalized urban population; unfortunately, as many of the participants we interviewed have made all-too-clear, marginalized young people often have difficulty realizing this potential due to a lack of access to and sustainability of appropriate resources.

In an attempt to address this lack of resources and access to music education, but also understanding the potential for creativity of youth, we sought to bring improvised music-making to Give Yourself Credit, an alternative high school in Guelph, Ontario. As a form of musical practice, improvisation is not structured around a preconceived outcome or master narrative, and is dialogic and open-ended, involving elements of call and response, listening, trust, and social obligation. Building on the work associated with the larger ICASP project, we define improvisation as musical practices that accent and embody real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking, and collaboration. These qualities suggest to us that improvised music-making offers a trenchant model for realizing many of the insights associated with the work of Paulo Freire and other theorists of critical pedagogy. Think, for example, about Freire's profound commitment to dialogic forms of problem-posing pedagogy and to a form of "thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity" (2000, 92). Indeed, as Heble and Waterman (2007, 1) suggest, by way of Freire, in their introduction to a special pedagogy issue of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*,

> musical improvisation…offers rich possibilities for developing a robust and alternative pedagogy that reaches across cultural and social divides, and that enables us to imagine what it might mean to achieve social justice and a meaningful sense of participation in community.

In the context of these links between theories of improvisation and insights from critical pedagogy, and for the purposes of the pilot project described in this paper, we viewed improvisation as a particularly accessible and appropriate form of music-based education that could engage youth who have limited exposure to an in-school music curriculum. By offering the students a unique educational opportunity to learn about an unfamiliar form of music, we

presented the participants with an alternative framework of understanding. Such alternative frameworks represent powerful forms of urban education that are not "just simply accepted or rejected but [that] are engaged in relation to other knowledges and other ways of making sense of the world" (Kincheloe 2006, 14).

To what extent, then, might the opportunity to "say who you are," both as an individual and as a member of a community, and to have this message listened to sympathetically, and responded to both creatively and respectfully, help to advance personal autonomy and group solidarity? To what extent might the opportunity to "play who you are," through improvised music, give marginalized youth a creative outlet in a supportive and collaborative environment? Under what circumstances does improvisation fulfill its potential, and when does it fall short? In addressing these questions, we seek to advance arguments about the kinds of new theoretical and organizational models and practices that might be developed to create and nurture itinerant-institutional partnerships for teaching improvisation, to codify and share techniques for teaching improvisation, and to articulate theories of education that embed improvisation itself as methodology and pedagogy.[2]

The School, the Students, and the Workshops

Following Paul Haack's understanding that music "is a multifaceted human behaviour which can fulfill many vital needs" (2000, 139), and building on the success of our previous outreach workshops, we endeavored to extend our mandates of outreach and community-based research to work with marginalized youth in the city. Understanding that the arts and music can be particularly beneficial in reaching, supporting, and engaging marginalized youth (Shields 2001), we contacted the Give Yourself Credit school to discuss the possibility of a musical and pedagogical collaboration using improvisation-based opportunities for the students enrolled at the school.

Based in the downtown core of a medium-sized urban centre in Southern Ontario, Give Yourself Credit is an alternative high school aimed at providing educational opportunities to at-risk youth aged 16 to 21 years old. The school was established in February 2006, and was created through the collaboration of the local school board and a number of community-service organizations. Give Yourself Credit unites educational opportunities with social, emotional, and medical support for students who have left the traditional school system for various reasons, such as homelessness, addiction, abuse (physical, mental,

emotional, and sexual), bullying, medical and psychological challenges, expulsion from other local schools, severe family situations, and/or difficulty learning in traditional classroom environments. At the time of the study, there were 12 students regularly attending the program (with 17 enrolled), ten of whom participated in the improvisation workshops (eight of whom were interviewed for this work). Of the 12 students, nine were female, and all students in the program were Caucasian. The classroom is staffed by one certified teacher and two child and youth care workers, all of whom participated in one or more workshops as well as in the interviews. The school is overseen by an off-site principal, who also holds the position of vice-principal of a local mainstream high school.

While we acknowledge that the Give Yourself Credit program may not immediately be recognizable as facing the same challenges as those faced by "inner city" schools in larger urban centres, we find resonance in June Hinckley`s description of urban schools as places "where neglect, indifference, decay, and even hatred—toward others and toward oneself—are such daily realities that some might consider them to be part of normal existence" (1995, 32). Indeed, for the students who attend Give Yourself Credit, this is, in many ways, a "last chance" environment, when other educational options within the city had simply not worked out, and the students themselves identify as feeling neglected, forgotten, and at times, possessed of self-hatred. And just as many urban schools are "underfunded, understaffed, and overpopulated" (Hinckley 1995, 32), so too is the Give Yourself Credit program. In order to assist these students, "we need to examine innovative trends in policy, programming, and curricula," Hinckley states, "and determine how music in the schools can contribute to providing a better education, and concomitantly, a better quality of life for those in urban schools" (Hinckley 1995, 32). It is here, when working with similar challenges and student issues, and aiming for similar goals of providing, via innovative musical practices, both a better education and a better life for the students attending these educational environments, that we see a space for bringing improvisational musical opportunities to aggrieved urban youth.

Working with the Give Yourself Credit staff, and considering the social, emotional, educational, and musical backgrounds of the student cohort, we agreed that a percussion-based workshop format would be most appropriate, as the majority of the students did not have a musical background, and they had responded positively in the past to a hand-drum-based activity in the school. These hands-on workshops were created and facilitated by Rob

Wallace, a percussionist and educator who had participated in previous improvisation workshops with at-risk youth, and emphasized improvisational drumming techniques and rhythms (with students having opportunities to use various percussion instruments), musical skill development, and group collaboration.

In addition to the improvisational workshops, participants were also engaged through interviews with the research team and through the video-documentation of the workshops. Building from the improvisational practices of the workshops, we structured our interviews around deep listening and call and response practices (Alterhaug 2004; Bunt 2003), thus increasing participant comfort and allowing for a variance in voices to emerge. The researchers were also participants in all the workshops and musical activities—an opportunity that allowed them to gain first-hand experience and understanding about the process of participating in these musical activities. Furthermore, it also allowed trust to be built between the researchers and the students, as the youth witnessed the researchers attempting the same musical and pedagogical activities (sometimes with little success!).

Pedagogical Approach and Challenges

We structured the workshops around the understanding that improvisation has its own set of approaches, and emerges from a rich history of complex and rigorous theory and practice. We were informed by Paul Berliner's understanding that "the popular definitions of improvisation that emphasize only its spontaneous, intuitive nature—characterizing it as the 'making something out of nothing'—are astonishingly incomplete. This simplistic understanding of improvisation," he tells us,

> belies the discipline and experience on which improvisers depend, and it obscures the actual practices and processes that engage them. Improvisation depends, in fact, on thinkers having absorbed a broad base of musical knowledge, including myriad conventions that contribute to formulating ideas logically, cogently, and expressively. (Berliner 1994, 492)

We approached the pedagogical decisions and workshop space with an understanding of the importance of improvisation as a democratic form of social exchange, which has the potential to cross social, cultural, and economic boundaries and to begin to dismantle teacher-student hierarchies within a learning setting. In addition, the workshops followed four critical components of improvisation pedagogy, as outlined by Carsalade, et al. (2008): the importance of individual expression within a group setting; instrumental work as a process of

personal growth; the importance of collective and cooperative work; and the importance of authority in the process of transmission. As such, these workshops emphasized inclusivity and respect, and were premised upon practice-grounded improvisation aimed at enhancing individual self-expression, call and response, and deep listening.

Drumming is associated with social cohesion and healing in many cultures. As Rob Wallace himself has told us, "There is certainly a growing body of theoretical and ethnographic research, not to mention much biographical evidence from musicians themselves, regarding the specific power of drumming in respect to physical and psychological healing, positive group interaction, and general enjoyment." In the context of such workshops, drumming works particularly well because it provides a relatively easy starting place even for people with little previous musical skill, and instruments can be "improvised" out of found objects such as buckets or water bottles. Rob's experience as a drummer and percussionist encompasses jazz, Indian classical music, popular, and experimental music. His workshops emphasized participation and collaborative support, practices that he grounded in cultural examples of drumming. In short, he was providing the students with a kind of model of social cooperation, while also helping them to build particular musical skills such as the ability to listen to one another and to respond attentively to the group dynamic.

Understanding the importance of drumming as a way to engage people, the majority of the pedagogical exercises were drawn from drummer and free improviser John Stevens' book *Search and Reflect* (2007)—a music workshop manual designed to encourage group music-making and aimed both at the musically inexperienced and at proficient musicians. We found that the clapping and counting exercises were a particularly good starting point for people with or without musical background, but were complex enough to continue to use over the course of four sessions. As Rob explained, "The key to getting these [activities] to work…is that everyone could do them in some form almost immediately. They contain the essential elements of all good music-making—pulse/rhythm, listening, et cetera—but they are simple enough that you don't even need an instrument to do them." Each workshop built on the previous one in complexity, incorporating in the musical exercises multimedia aspects, including video clips of various drumming and percussion sessions, as well as elements that emphasized listening to fellow class participants and to the larger soundscape (both inside and out of the classroom).

While individual self-expression was certainly celebrated, the workshops still adhered to a democratic form of student participation, attempting to ensure that all musicians had the opportunity to "say and play who they are," while simultaneously listening and responding to others. In many instances, Rob would call for a pause in the music-making, to point out ways in which participants could be more responsive to each other, as well as moments where individuals may have approached their improvisational process with a lack of respect for their fellow musicians. While Rob was cognizant of, and committed to, removing the power dynamics often inherent in the student-teacher relationship, he still had to negotiate the—at times uneasy—positionality of being the "expert" and the facilitator who had the responsibility to intervene in the improvisational process to provide instruction, guidance, and constructive feedback. We're reminded here that improvisation, in itself, may not be an inherently positive process. As the passage we've quoted from Berliner implies, improvisation as music is not just about "being in the moment"; its potential as a positive form of social practice is dependent upon a commitment to certain principles of engagement.

Responding to this pedagogical approach, the child and youth care worker shared with us that improvised music provides the opportunity for students to explore new forms of self-expression and other possible future paths, because it "gives them something as a release or as [a way to] feel different in a group." As the classroom teacher noted,

> I think it's that whole option [of music education] and how these guys get engaged and how it's a kind of self expression for them….You know a lot of them come [to Fresh Start] and that avenue [is] closed. …A lot of doors are closed in a lot of different places and it's hard because some of these students come in here who are musically inclined.

Due to this experience, many students shared that they were excited to attend school and looked forward to the days that the improvisation workshops were held. This active desire to attend school is a very positive response for students who have often felt alienated from educational environments and one that fostered great excitement within the group. As one student stated, one of the best parts of the workshop was "being able to make my own part of something." For another student, one of the more positive results of the workshop was the realization "that I can do it, [and] I never even tried it before."

Of course, active learning can take many forms. A significant focus therefore became the expansion of the internal characteristics of improvisation onto a democratically structured environment. The workshops became a space that allowed students opportunities for self-

expression without having to use words. For several students, this was something of a revelation: it allowed them to witness changes not only in themselves, but also, significantly, in their classmates. As one student explained, watching her friend participate for the first time in a group activity and enjoy herself was a big event, "She's totally like really hard on herself and down in the dumps a lot, and while we were doing those workshops, I actually saw her smile a couple times and she was happy, and it was like wow!"

In part because of the changes in student self-confidence and self-expression, staff and students also noticed an increase in individual and group cohesion, camaraderie, and growth—consider for example Carsalade et al.'s (2008) components of improvisation pedagogy—changes that reportedly continued after the workshops were completed, "I think that during the workshop we seemed to…I don't want to use the word bond, but it was like a bonding experience." In fact, many students noted in their interviews with us that the workshops brought them closer together, with one commenting that, "Everyone got along really well and there wasn't much bickering or anything. Usually in things there's always bickering." For the staff, this increase in group cohesion and growth had a positive impact on the classroom environment, particularly in the formation of a stronger sense of community and a new form of group acceptance. Lastly, students reported an increased ability to focus and listen carefully, not only to the music, but to each other. Translating these classroom activities to her life outside school, a student spoke about the impact of the deep listening techniques on her own practice of problem-solving as a mother, "[The listening exercises] have helped my own parenting. I'm actually able to sit and listen to my children and they'll say, 'Okay, this is what is happening,' and I'll be like, 'Okay, this is what I can do to help.' It made me a better listener."

This ability to adapt to changing situations, as well as to listen and respond to others, is of particular significance for marginalized youth in urban settings, as these skills are necessary, yet often lacking. In addition, the opportunities for personal growth and development that emerged from these exposures to improvisation theory, pedagogy, and practice, may help to mediate and ameliorate some of the personal and social difficulties with which these aggrieved youth contend.

Despite the positive comments and findings, it is important to note that for some students—particularly those with anxiety disorders—these workshops caused some distress. Worry and performance anxiety were present as one student shared, "When I thought I was

doing something well, I was like more confident with it, but when I was like messing up, 'Oh oh oh no! What should I… when do I go back in…all hesitant and crap." For some students, the stress of participating in a new, on-the-spot, improvised situation was disorienting, "When everyone was making noises at one point in time I...totally got embarrassed." As the workshops continued, these students reported that their anxieties lessened as they became more comfortable with the situation; yet, given particular mental-emotional conditions, this sense of anxiety certainly remains an area of attention. Although the improvisation model utilized in this workshop emphasized the dismantling of barriers, it also created new barriers around an individual's apprehension or inability to become immersed in the group and musical process. While some students became very engaged in the process, and responded positively to the enhanced group cohesion, other students felt self-conscious and unable to "keep up". These students withdrew from the process at times; with the encouragement of their classmates and the facilitators, however, they often returned to the group activity, albeit tentatively.

While we are certainly not arguing that improvisation is an educational panacea, the testimonials provided by participants from Give Yourself Credit, combined with our experiences with these workshops, indicate that there are certainly enriching, exciting, and important pedagogical implications for engaging aggrieved urban youth through improvisational music in classroom environments. Gains were at times musical, at times social or interactional, and at times personal and educative; this broader view of music education is essential to further considering such an approach. Clearly, improvisational musical practices that foster democratic exchanges, trust, social equity, respect, and deep listening—combined with structured pedagogies aiming at self expression, personal growth, and cooperation—can introduce new ideas and promote feelings of confidence and inclusion for marginalized youth through alternative urban education programs.

Improvisation and/as Pedagogy

In creating positive musical opportunities for urban youth who exist on the margins of the educational system for a variety of social, emotional, psychological, and physical reasons, we need to consider both the social context and the particular cohort of participants, and understand that music is not only embedded within these contexts, but is itself a social praxis (Regelski, 2009). Indeed, according to David Lines, there

> appears to be growing awareness among people involved in music study, theory, performance and research in the idea that music is intrinsically entwined with human affairs, with the aims and desires of cultural expression, and with instances of human power, freedom, dominance, control, and resistance. These potentially democratic concerns about music include interest in the musical activity of marginalized communities. (2008, 1)

In this context, the value of any form of music education must also be measured by its ability to make a difference in the lives of individual participants, as well as to add value to the larger social and political contexts in which those individuals operate (Regelski 2005).

As mentioned above, students within this alternative high school setting—and arguably, within other urban educational settings—face myriad social, emotional, mental, and economic challenges. Our research uncovered that many students did not want to participate in "academic" approaches to music; rather, they desired opportunities to express themselves and their unique perspective and school culture, through freer forms of musical practice. It is here that we may find the space, and the interest to provide musical opportunities to marginalized youth through structured, practice-grounded models of improvisation.

Following Lewis (2000), we understand that successful improvisation is predicated on democratic exchange and mutual trust, so that improvisation pedagogy represents a shift away from traditional hierarchical modes of teacher-centred pedagogy. The relationship between Rob Wallace and the students played a central role in creating an open and engaged workshop atmosphere, and in going some distance toward resolving what Freire (2000, 79) refers to as "the teacher-student contradiction." Although Rob was, in some senses, an "authority" figure because of his experience and expertise with improvisational techniques and practices, his commitment to using improvisation-based pedagogy to begin to dismantle the hierarchies and power structures within educational settings, contributed to the success of these workshops and was key to creating a pedagogy structured around improvisatory techniques and values. Positive student feedback about Rob's interactive pedagogy, indeed, reinforces the claim made by Maud Hickey in her article "Can Improvisation Be Taught?" Learner-directed free improvisation "cannot be taught in the traditional sense," she argues. Rather it must be "experienced, facilitated, coached and stimulated" (2009, 294).

As we said at the outset, one of our research goals was to codify the particular benefits of improvisation pedagogy, and to create a framework for improvisation *as* pedagogy. As mentioned above, the improvisational pedagogical framework of these workshops was sparked, in part, by Carsalade, et al.'s (2008) four crucial aspects of

successful improvisation pedagogy:

a. *The importance of individual expression within a group setting*.
b. *Instrumental work as a process of personal growth.*
c. *The importance of collective and cooperative work.*
d. *The importance of authority in the process of transmission.*

While we agree in the main with these findings, our own research illuminated five additional areas of consideration for improvisation pedagogy:

e. *The importance of context & flexibility*: knowledge of both the context and the participants was crucial. Collaboration with the staff and students helped us to create appropriate, accessible, and meaningful musical and educational opportunities. We also need to learn continuously from youth and teachers in order to adapt our pedagogical strategies to suit the specific needs of individuals or groups, particularly when working with aggrieved and marginalized populations.
f. *The importance of listening and responding*: while improvisation as a form of musical practice and pedagogy is implicitly interactive, it is important to emphasize that for the facilitators of such workshops, listening and responding to each individual in the group is of the utmost importance. Given that these workshops were working with youth who experience a variety of developmental and emotional difficulties, it is important that the facilitators be mindful that occasionally the changeable and noisy atmosphere of the workshops can cause stress and distress in some students.
g. *The importance of hands-on opportunities throughout the entirety of the workshops*: the staff and students emphasized the power of providing youth the opportunity to play various sorts of instruments that were appropriate and adapted to their specific context, skills, abilities, and needs. Our hands-on approach also provided the opportunity for the participants to discover alternative ways to deal with the myriad social, emotional, and physical issues they face on a daily basis.
h. *The importance of creative collaboration between and among artists, community organizations, staff, volunteers, researchers, and students*: our research suggests that key to the improvisation as pedagogy approach is the creative collaboration, and open communication, between and among multi-stakeholders. This collaboration is on-going, and features numerous opportunities for dialogue.
i. *The importance of understanding improvisation-based music education as embedded*

> *within larger social and political contexts*: music-making does not take place in isolation and carries diverse meanings for participants. An understanding of the socio-political impacts, meanings, and new avenues of inquiry is critical to an improvisation as pedagogy approach. Moreover, the negotiation of difference, one of the crucial lessons of improvisation, offers deeply significant and far-reaching implications for education and society.

Our work also suggests that "authority in the process of transmission" may be less important than fostering a model of democratic exchange, for if improvisation is to be a widely available pedagogy, it cannot rely on a small number of internationally respected artist teachers; rather, it should be premised on respect, deep listening, equity, and creative democratic collaboration developed locally.

By virtue of the qualities of respect, listening, trust, and democratic exchange, these workshops provided moments within the daily schooling of these students where what they had to "play" was valued, and how they were "received" had everything to do with their participation, and nothing to do with their backgrounds, their clothes, or their socio-economic condition. These areas of freedom, combined with the breaking down of the student-teacher power relations, increase students' '*conscientization*' (to borrow Paulo Freire's term for critical consciousness), and as such, begin to contribute to a more liberatory educational experience for the students.

Avenues for Future Research and Work

Through our research with Give Yourself Credit, we have identified three exciting areas of further inquiry: ongoing resonance in young peoples' lives, a deeper analysis of improvisation across a variety of vectors, and the socio-political and educational impacts of improvisation as pedagogy. It is clear from the comments presented above that we need to track the ongoing resonance of the workshops in order to see whether they have sustained benefits in participants' lives. How can we make the link between musical improvisation and learning specific social skills more explicit? We also need to create tools for analysing the impacts of vectors such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, ability, and gender on the effectiveness of improvisation pedagogy.

In addition, what happens when improvisation pedagogy fails? We need, as suggested, both to codify and to make available adaptable models for teaching improvisation,

as well as to understand how best to embed improvisation in a variety of educational contexts. Rather than merely adopting a "what works" approach to pedagogy which, as Kincheloe (2006) and Popkewitz (2008) argue, is often the aim of educational reform policies, we recognize that the complex sociopolitical and cultural challenges facing urban communities call for diverse approaches that make visible the limitations of normative and static forms of learning.

Conclusion

Panagiotis Kanellopoulos has argued that in order

> for improvisation to become a flourishing practice and an edifying experience within music education settings, teachers need to…be prepared to follow messy pathways of present-tense exploration…They need as well to become comfortable functioning as co-musicians rather than as instructors, learning how to follow the students' intentions and preserving openness, both in musical actions and discussions. (2007, 100)

Breaking down such received hierarchies, as any educator will attest, is no easy task. However, if we remain committed to the notion that students should play an active role in the educational process, and that teachers and students are simultaneously learners and knowledge-producers, then improvisation, as the data from our research suggests, may offer us a resonant pedagogical model.

It is our hope that the research presented here through a case study within a multi-year international research project doing similar work (and yielding similar results) will help to spark a growing recognition among music educators about the extent to which community-based outreach initiatives in urban contexts might be understood as powerful sites of pedagogical intervention. Wyman suggests that

> engagement with artistic creativity develops the ability to think creatively in ways that significantly enlarge the educational experience. It encourages the flexible, nuanced thinking that will be an essential requirement of any innovative response to the challenges we face. It makes us see our world in fresh ways, encourages suppleness of mind. Doubt is cast on our most comfortable perceptions. We learn the art of adaptability. (2004, 7)

While Wyman does not speak specifically about music or about improvisation here, many of his assertions about the arts and their ability to foster an openness to different points of view, their resolve to educate us for uncertainty, are akin to claims that have been made about improvisational musical practice as being about social mobility, opportunities for positive engagement, increased self-expression and worth for members of subordinated social groups

(Shields 2001) and about offering innovative ways to trouble the assumptions (and the expectations of fixity) fostered by institutionalized systems of representation (Heble 2000).

Improvisation as pedagogy, in short, speaks directly to the risks we need to take in music education and in life in order to create opportunities for change, particularly within urban alternative high school settings, where underfunding, lack of access to resources, and student mental and emotional issues can cause significant challenges for educators and students alike. It can, moreover, engage with the ways that traditional school curricula have reproduced the values of the dominant culture and alienated urban students (Kincheloe 2006, 24; Popkewitz 2008), and play a significant role in cultivating resources for hope. "One of the tasks of the progressive educator," writes Freire (1994, 9), "is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be." We find hope in the willingness of a growing number of music educators to develop innovative participatory pedagogies to enhance student engagement. After all, when students become active participants in the production of knowledge—as is possible, according to our research, through improvisational-based music education experiences—rather than passive recipients of information, they model new kinds of relationships, and they become engaged and curious listeners; they begin, in effect, to hear and to play the world anew. And these new levels of attentiveness, as the case study discussed here makes clear, lead to achievements of personal insight, social cooperation and equity, as well as to an openness to unexpected outcomes and encounters by *saying* and *playing* who they are.

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Notes

[1] Through our larger research project, and in partnership with a wide range of community-based organizations, we have developed an integrated series of long-term outreach initiatives with youth in urban centers across Canada and internationally. Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) is a multi-institutional research project centered at the University of Guelph under the direction of Ajay Heble. For more information about the ICASP project, see www.improvcommunity.ca.

[2] As a key part of the improvisational approach of this research, we also employed an improvisational co-writing-as-inquiry approach in this article, which complemented our emphasis on collaboration. This article was co-written using a wiki interface, and is the joint, emergent product of two professors, two PhD students, and one undergraduate student, with

backgrounds in Music, English, and Environmental Philosophy and Education. Our writing, like our research, brings into dialogue the diverse voices of the authors and project participants to illuminate unexpected themes and exciting new areas of inquiry.

About the Authors

Ajay Heble is the author or editor of several books, including *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (2000), and *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue* (2004). He is a founding editor of the online peer-reviewed journal, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*. As a pianist, Heble has released two CDs of improvised music, including a quartet recording on the Ambiances Magnétiques label. He is a Professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph and Director of the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research project.

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Ellen Waterman is a professional flutist and scholar specializing in creative improvisation and contemporary music and sound. She is a co-investigator with the Improvisation, Community and Social Practice project and co-creator of the Improvisation Tool Kit. Waterman's work on gender, sound, and technology includes a special issue of the journal *Intersections: Journal of Canadian Music 26(2)* (2006). Her anthology, *Sonic Geography Imagined and Remembered* (2002), provides the first cultural critique of acoustic ecology, and she has published extensively on the environmental music theatre of R. Murray Schafer. Waterman is Dean of the School of Music at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

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