11

DEVELOPING CREATIVE COMPETENCIES THROUGH IMPROVISATION—LIVING MUSICALLY

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Living Musically is an approach, using improvisation as a model or metaphor, to understand the world and live well in it. This way of thinking assumes that our lives are essentially unscripted improvisations and our ability to listen, be aware of, and respond effectively to relationships is central to our ability to live responsibly. This chapter presents tools that establish improvisation as a mode of creative inquiry and communication that can be used as an intentional practice, both individually and within groups.

Part of our self-awareness as human beings is built upon rhythm and movement, of which Flatischler (1992) writes:

> Our life in this world begins with the first breath. This, and the cutting of the umbilical cord, is a step toward rhythmic autonomy . . . In breathing we . . . encounter the co-existence of letting be and taking action—the two states whose interaction is an essential part of rhythm and music.
>
> *(p. 95)*

Our breathing ties us to the movement of time, and discovering our personal rhythm can serve to facilitate all listening—auditory listening, visual listening, and somatic listening. The theories and approaches presented here are a result of the author's experiences in music and dance improvisation, two-dimensional design, performance, and teaching. Interactive relationships inherent in music serve as the foundation for this approach. By devising frameworks to "play" within, we create a space to facilitate dialogues as a means of advancing ideas, working together, learning through experience, and experiencing directly. The frameworks presented draw on musical elements that include basic human capacities of breath, pulse, time, and the ability to perceive patterns, as well as

gradations of texture, tension, nuance, and expression as part of a larger field of relationships. In this piece, music is used as a model or archetype of all basic modes of communication and humans living together; prior musical or artistic training is not necessary.

The process begins within each individual and progresses into simple relationships and ultimately to collective group ensemble play—developing the ability to communicate beyond words through sound, simple movement, and visual and spatial relationships. There is interplay between critical thinking and creative thinking as analytical, intellectual, and reasoning skill sets combine with intuitive and embodied sensory abilities for exploring new modes of communication and interaction, always with the potential to extend into other aspects of one's life. Common orienting concepts such as listening, focus, spontaneity, imagination, and collaboration weave through three stages for building an improvisational practice:

1. Awareness of self (mindful focus, being present)
2. Bridging beyond self
3. Creative interaction.

This chapter presents these three stages as part of a template that can be applied to oneself and/or to collaborative group-work. The template is flexible as one's awareness cycles through different stages of the practice, merging self-awareness in a continuous state of bridging out, beyond oneself into creative interaction with a medium, an idea, or with others (see Figure 11.1).

> The process of creating music as a shared experience helps us to integrate its meaning into the concept of who we are and how we relate to others. It also helps us find a way of relating that satisfies our own personal needs and yet adjusts to the objective circumstances of the world around us.
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> *(Leite, 2003, n.p.)*

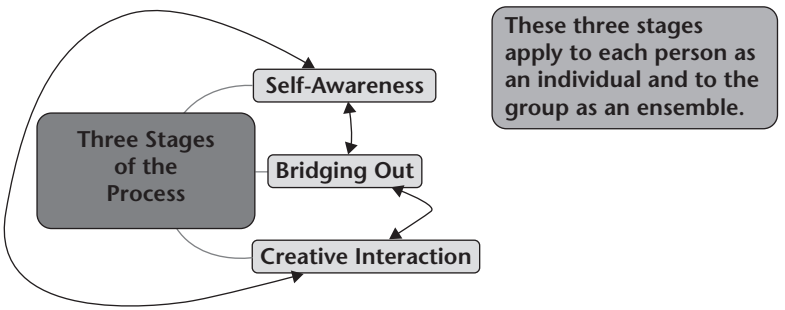

FIGURE 11.1 Improvisational Practice

When broken down, this approach to the practice of improvisation looks like the practice of being humane. It emphasizes shared responsibility in community, facilitates ways to negotiate differences, and aids in the development of listening skills, all of which contribute to shifts of awareness from the self to the group, and back.

Getting Started

Nachmanovitch (1990) writes that all creative acts are forms of play, which is the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle and one of the great primal life functions. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible (p. 42). According to Ackerman (1999), "Because we think of play as the opposite of seriousness, we don't notice that it governs most of society—political games, in-law games, money games, love games, advertising games, to list only a few spheres where gamesmanship is rampant" (p. 11). One could add war games to the list. The spirit of play is central to this work, and the play inherently demands focus, or the need to keep one's eye on the ball as the playing unfolds. But what is the "ball"? What is the context of the play and how is it structured in higher education?

The "ball" is Viola Spolin's (1983) metaphor for the point of concentration, or point of focus. Spolin, America's most recognized pioneer in theatre games, taught that narrowing our focus in this way facilitates the *game* as it unfolds in real time. Without the "ball"—focus—there is no game. Focus is what engages and sustains an ongoing and evolving activity, keeping it alive in the present moment. Structuring a simple *score* creates limitations and conditions for things to happen. Each improvisational score establishes a language—a set of parameters or a field of focus—within which to play. Scores are like consonants, or frameworks, that are brought to life by vowels. David Abram (1996) describes how the ancient Hebrew language is comprised of consonants only, no vowels. It is our breath that shapes the consonants into vowels that form the meaning of the words (p. 242). The instructor and students' inquiry are the "vowels" that bring the concepts to life, shaping them into stories with their own interpretation and relationship to the shared human experience of rhythm, time, and communication. Keep in mind that a score can be many things, from a list you follow at the grocery store to a plan for an approach you will take in a job interview. "Performance" is shaped by one's ability to navigate the linear construct of time with the fluidity of water. Figure 11.2 shows a four-step process for building simple scores.

1. A simple seed idea defines parameters with one or two rules for engagement.
2. Play requires a willingness to experiment while letting go of judgment. It evolves through repetition, sustained focus, and working through ambiguity.
3. Reflection and discussion of the action, choices, and resultant relationships may bring up questions, suggestions for modifying the approach, and connections to other ideas or contexts.
4. Steps 2 and 3 are repeated as the inquiry deepens.

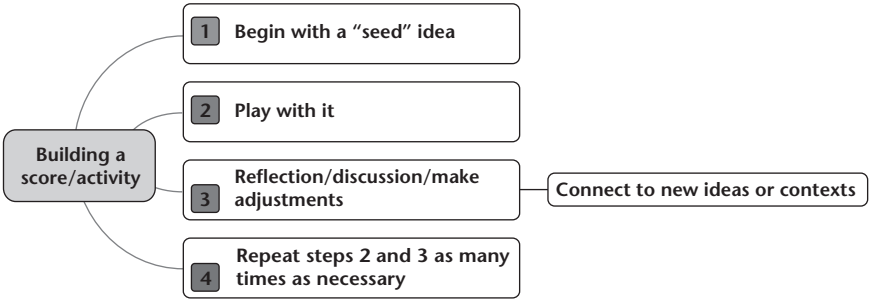

FIGURE 11.2 Foundational Practice

Defining parameters for shaping one's ideas helps provide form and content to spontaneous, intuitive interactions. Traditional musical syntax is built upon pitch, harmony, and rhythm, which narrow the realm of possibility for non-musicians. The theorist Leonard Meyer presents a series of *non-syntactic* parameters that expand the musical language to include a variety of textures. These extend contextual applications beyond traditional music into other aspects of life and can be used as basic building blocks. They include *density* (the amount of activity from dense to sparse), *dynamics* (in music this refers to varying degrees of loudness; in non-musical contexts it is the amount of energy or force used), *duration* (how long sounds are sustained), *range* (high or low range of pitch, or levels of height), *basic pulse patterns*, *flow*, and *silence* (Sarath, 2010).

Organization is further achieved through imitation or repetition, changing the tone color (timbre), fragmentation (deconstructing or breaking something into smaller parts), or retrograde (doing something in reverse from end to beginning). Using these parameters as tools for shaping ideas makes it easier to narrow one's focus and play with specific elements of an idea. "Technique itself springs from play, because we can acquire technique only by the practice of practice, by persistently experimenting and playing with our tools and testing their limits and resistances" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 42).

This idea of practicing practice may sound odd, although when you break down the approach to deep practice, as Daniel Coyle does in *The Talent Code*, the steps are fairly straightforward. Essentially the skills are to (1) absorb the whole idea, or overview; (2) break it into chunks; (3) slow it down; and (4) repeat it. Musicians, dancers, and athletes apply these techniques in their practice (Coyle, 2009). The guitarist/composer David Torn[1] (personal communication, August 20, 2015) was describing how, when learning pieces as a kid, he would break the musical ideas apart using them as springboards for creating something new, leaving the written piece completely and constructing his own extemporaneous exploration. His folks never knew he was not "practicing" the music; but he actually was, in a deeper way, getting lost in the process by taking the new ideas into different directions. Torn was learning the written music by digesting the

language and playing with it, illustrating Nachmanovitch's (1990) point of view, that improvisatory play is at the heart of creative activity—it is one of the great primal life functions and our brain's favorite way of learning and maneuvering (p. 42). Establishing and sustaining one's focus facilitates the shaping of ideas in a conversational realm, whether done as an individual activity or with others. This ability to maintain focus facilitates awareness of how everything may become a significant part of a larger field of relationships.

Awareness of Self—Focus

Self-awareness and listening are critical first steps for improvisation and ultimately for creative expression. It is about *being* in time. According to Perloff and Junkerman (1994), the composer John Cage viewed this as learning how to "inhabit oneself, to live in the depth of connection that is one's person" (p. 204), focusing, narrowing, and sustaining one's attention. The approach involves contemplative as well as more informal or pedestrian approaches to being—listening; establishing a personal relational space in which we are grounded, settled in the present and able to observe without judgment—observing with all senses, both internally and externally. Students learn to be more fully present in the classroom, meaning they are able to focus and sustain attention on evolving relationships, being respectful and responsible in relationships.

A contemplative approach to cultivating awareness and focus is through breath and body/mind awareness. Attuning to breathing ties us to the present moment. Always bringing our attention back to the breath when our mind wanders establishes a sense of being grounded, as if standing on a solid bridge with our thoughts, past, present, and future, all flowing down the river under the bridge. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005) writes how breathing is fundamental to life:

> It is just happening . . . we usually don't pay attention to it unless we are choking or drowning, have allergies or a cold. But imagine resting in an awareness of breathing. To do so requires first that we feel the breath and afford it a place in the field of awareness, which is always changing in terms of what the mind or the body or the world offers up to divert and distract our attention. We might be able to feel the breath, but in the next moment, it is forgotten in favor of something else. The aiming is here, but there is no sustaining. So we have to aim over and over again. Coming back, coming back, coming back to the breath over and over again.
>
> *(pp. 75–76)*

Breath meditation is a contemplative practice that can be integrated into an informal or pedestrian practice by using the breath to observe the sensations in the body. This process of body/mind scanning[2] starts with observing the natural flow of our breathing, allowing the exhalation to drop further into the abdomen

without force, observing the gentle turnaround into the inhalation. To begin, we allow the inhalation to only go to the top of the abdomen, hold for three counts and turn back into an exhalation. We then repeat this, again without forcing anything. Then we allow the inhalation to extend to the middle of our chest, hold for three counts, then exhale, holding at the base for three counts before inhaling again. This is repeated, then repeated again with the inhale extending to the top of the chest and held for three counts before exhaling. Observations and sensations in all body parts: torso, shoulders, neck, hips and lower back, tongue and jaw, elbows, eyes and forehead, hands, fingers, feet, and toes continually invite tension to release through exhalations. We end by returning to normal breathing, continuing to observe for a couple of minutes before finishing.

There is portability to this practice; we have an open invitation to apply any of these skills at any time—we just have to remember to remind ourselves to remember to remind ourselves to remember. One dance student was having difficulty staying balanced while performing a movement combination. Having learned this technique in an earlier class she remembered to "check-in" with a quick body/mind scan in the time of two breath cycles. Two things were revealed: that she was holding her breath while dancing, and that her right arm was tensing up at her shoulder. This observation helped her remember to breathe more freely, which opened her torso-arms-shoulder-neck and reduced her balance problem. Feeling one's breath, fusing with it and following it leads to new ways of shaping explorations. Breath becomes a primary element of discovery and an integral element in which unconscious physical acts are made conscious to further students' understanding of their physical interaction with the environment, and each other (Sellers-Young, 2002). It also forms the foundation upon which we are able to monitor and sustain attention.

Exercise 1: 60-Second Sound Score

For many, improvising with sounds can be overwhelming, as the "instrument" may be foreign or separate from our normal way of being, even when using our voice as an instrument. A 60-Second Sound Score contextualizes how we may transfer these techniques to other modes of interaction. The seed idea is painting with sound on a canvas of silence. Remembering Spolin's (1983) analogy—without the "ball" there is no game—we shift our focus from the breath to the *silence* of a 60-second window of time and the single sound we get to place in that window. Bringing the subjective experience into the objective realm is achieved by listening to recorded performances of this score while observing the language of sound shaping silence through time/space.

The 60-Second Sound Score is to be done with a group of five or more people:

1. Each person has a single, sustained, ringing sound to use only once.
2. Each person's focus is on the silence—the 60-second empty space into which they will place their one and only sound.

3. Players listen intently to the silence, making a choice of where, when, and how loud to approach their sound.

When listening to the recording of this one-minute piece, performers tend to first listen self-consciously for their one sound. Repeated listening facilitates objectivity, separating ourselves from our "sound" as "me," changing our relationship to the experience, setting up a new self-awareness in relation to time and space. In this case the silence is a foundation upon which we watch/listen, maintaining an intuitive stance for our entry into the sound-space. Repeated experiences such as this facilitate the ability to be in a heightened state of personal awareness, while opening that awareness to include others.

Listening activities such as this have caused many students to reconsider their habitual behavior of putting headphones on as soon as they step outside. As their awareness of soundscapes becomes sensitized they become curious about the symphony of sounds in the world around them. The unconventional products/artifacts (recordings of creative activities) become catalysts for students examining their personal listening habits, and their sense of aural and environmental space.

Exercise 2: Right Before Our Ears[3]—The Other

The seed idea is to listen (with headphones) to a short, challenging piece of music once a day for at least ten minutes each day for a week. Turn all phones off and do not allow anyone or anything to disrupt your attention.

Students are directed to:

- Write what you observe without editing. What are you hearing? How do you react to what you hear? Write about what you see/hear before you. Try to continue to describe it as faithfully as possible. Just write—don't overthink about what you're writing. Write whatever it is you can see/hear, and also whatever is in and on your mind. Write about what distracts you, too. And what it is like to bring your attention back to your subject. This is an exercise, but most importantly, it is *your* exercise. Be honest; do it as outlined here.

As students post this assignment nightly for a week, the instructor corresponds with comments each night allowing for direct assessment and documentation of students' progress, providing opportunities to help redirect habitual behavior—their reaction to something that was very different. Many students tend to begin repeating themselves after day 3, needing prompting from the instructor on how to listen to hear new things, or to hear in new ways. Some students were very challenged to get past their initial repulsion to the music.[4]

By carefully establishing a one-on-one online relationship with each student, over the course of a week most made a transformation and were able to "see"

beyond their personal bias by identifying specific instruments to follow, listening to two instruments in relation to each other, determining what was causing the reaction they were experiencing, listening to how the range of highs and lows in pitch play out over the course of the short piece, or noticing how moving while listening made it easier. One student's final observation points to a larger issue:

> The music we have listened to thus far in the class has been unfamiliar and sometimes hard to listen to. The fear and discomfort we feel when confronted by "the other" in music is very similar to the fear and discomfort caused by "the other" in society, such as communities of people that we don't interact with often . . . how easy it is to ignore things or people that I am unfamiliar with and scared of.

This online exchange between instructor and student culminated in a class discussion about how we react in similar ways in different contexts, like social situations. The discussion touched upon assumptions we make such as racial profiling, what happens when we make assumptions and what are they based on, and what our responsibility is in this process. It became clear that the associations we bring to something are more a result of our own imagination rather than what is actually in front of us, and how important it is to become aware of what we are in relationship with, learning as much as we can about "the other."

Exercise 3: Drawing Conversations—Visual Listening

Another way to practice listening to our intuitive "voice," or inner impulse, is through drawing conversations: a my-turn/your-turn exchange where marks on a page replace spoken language.

- The seed idea, or purpose, is to observe the point of intuitive impulse, observing the moment when you are looking at the design and something *tells* you what needs to come next. You *act* on that impulse by adding your line gesture(s), or marks, to the page: working on seeing beyond judgment and incorporating mistakes.

This score is to be done in pairs with a blank piece of paper serving as an empty, *silent* space. Using a pen, both people take turns marking the page. One person begins with a mark or line gesture; the other person responds in relation to the first mark. There are no mistakes as each mark is something on which the next person will build. Limiting our language to markings on paper invites us to "hear" the markings, as the pens become the instrument for expression and we develop visual listening. The aim is for the "person" to disappear as line gestures on the page begin to "speak," reshaping the space into a new form. A language is established through four main concepts: (1) nothing exists by itself, but in

relation to what it is next to; (2) opposites generate maximum tensions; (3) variety stimulates the eye; and (4) repetition serves to unify and balance diverse elements. Abstract forms, shapes, lines, tones, and colors have a visual energy that radiates like heat waves in space and seem to have a life of their own. They interact with one another, creating tensions that communicate to the viewer without representing something from nature (Kaplan, 1998, p. 86). These concepts are shaped into visual conversations using the non-syntactic techniques mentioned earlier. The visual relationships unfolding through this score are much like relationships that we make in improvised music, but they unfold more slowly.

The conversation continues back and forth until the drawing is "done." The "finished" drawing is then analyzed, observing the use of space, quality of lines and shapes, repeating patterns, and so forth. The design is described using as many adjectives as possible. Then immediately, another drawing conversation begins, with the specific intention of creating contrast—whatever that means—based on the previous discussion. Looking at the evolving design, our actions are guided by the impulse to create a contrast to the first drawing, bypassing analytical pre-planning. When that drawing is complete, both drawings are compared, observing how contrasts were achieved, or not. "Drawing Conversations" is the first activity in a sequence that continues into a solo "doodle" project that offers opportunities to play with all aspects of improvisational practice alone, at any time. This two-dimensional design project is then extended into a three-dimensional collage, and eventually into a performance project.

Many students use the solo iteration of this doodle project as a way to relax, where it becomes a contemplative activity. Someone once presented their final solo doodle saying that they had so much homework to complete but all they wanted to do was this assignment. So they drew for two hours before doing the rest of their homework, which then seemed to get done effortlessly. This activity helped one first-year undergraduate student develop a deeper understanding of how to listen and shape ideas in another modality.

> The drawing conversation was an eye-opener . . . there are so many different ways to communicate. At first my partner and I were talking and drawing, but as the drawing became more detailed the talking stopped. I realized that objects and instruments are not meant to be "mastered" or totally controlled, but to be *linked* with. As dancers we are taught that our body is our instrument and we must learn to control and master it. It had never occurred to me to *listen* to my body and become *one* with it. Mastering and becoming one with something are two completely different things.

For this student, visual listening and interacting through two-dimensional spatial design was a portal into the improvisational process. They *became* the process, being grasped by an idea, getting swallowed up in time; the outside

world disappears except for the world one is creating. Hours can go by feeling like minutes, tapping into a state much like Csikszentmihalyi's description of flow (1990).

Exercise 4a: Chaos to Unity Part One

Chaos to Unity is a warm-up score that follows an arc through each of the three stages of building an improvisational practice. Part One illustrates the first stage of the practice, Awareness of Self. It allows each person to focus internally on their personal relational space by connecting with their breath cycles. Part Two illustrates the second stage, Bridging Out, which focuses on peripheral awareness by bringing the breath cycles into sound, then into movement, gradually opening the awareness to the movement of the whole group's cycles while maintaining one's personal focus. The transition into Part Three illustrates the third stage, Creative Interaction. It begins with walking and leads to entrainment, establishing a group pulse, which is used for ensemble rhythmic play. Once the structure is learned, people are able to move through the full three-section score at their own pace, culminating in a rhythmic jam.

The seed idea for Part One of this score is to help students become fully present: first establishing one's personal awareness, then gradually expanding one's peripheral awareness to include others. A leader gives cues for the progression of the activity until the participants learn the score. The leader is also improvising, listening to the group, and sensing the right time to move the structure forward. This phase of the warm-up takes at least five minutes.

1. Begin by establishing personal, relational space by observing the flow of breath.
2. Leader's cue: bring individual breath cycles into an audible rhythm by snapping or clapping at the point at which the inhalation turns around into an exhalation. It starts to sound like kernels of popcorn, highlighting our similarities (we're all breathing) and our differences (we breathe in our own rhythmic cycles).
3. Leader's cue: take a step at the turnaround point of the breath. The rhythm is visible in the room, looking like a slow-motion, stop-action film with everyone moving at different times. While each person's focus is primarily internal, they are peripherally aware of the others, first through the snapping sounds, and now through the incremental traveling.
4. Leader's cue: the group begins walking through the full duration of the exhalation, stopping in stillness for the inhalation, opening awareness even more as we travel and negotiate with other bodies through the space.
5. Leader cue: invite everyone to notice others traveling in the same duration, and to "flock" with them—walking together as a group. The random patterns of people walking gradually begins to reshape into groups traveling

and stopping together, suggesting that as we expand our awareness out, we open ourselves to entrainment: synchronization of two or more rhythmic cycles. Flocking continues until one's natural breath patterns become stressed. Then they break away to follow their own breath rhythm.

6. Leader's cue: invite the group to walk naturally through the space, breathing normally, observing the kinesthetic flow of weaving in and out of one another with a heightened awareness of their interrelationships.

Student comments illustrate formative connections to autonomy and personal agency and a merging of who we are as individuals with what we know. One student writes, "The only way we were able to build order out of chaos was through our ability to listen [with all our senses] and adapt to each other." Another writes:

> listening to breath makes rhythm so much easier to understand and work with. It also makes a lot of sense. Breath is itself a rhythm . . . breath may just create a habit and skill for listening to rhythm and feeling it more clearly.

This student's reflection is supported by Lefebvre's (2004) view of our ability to listen first to our body and learn from it in order to appreciate and understand external rhythms. He writes, "The rhythm analyst . . . listens—and first to his body; he learns rhythm from it, in order consequently to appreciate external rhythms" (p. 19).

The process of facilitating awareness begins within oneself and is further defined as we are in relationship with others and the environment. Moving further into the practice of improvisation, we see that cycling back around to self-awareness is an ongoing part of the whole process that deepens and evolves with each new experience.

Bridging Beyond Self

The second stage of improvisational practice builds on the ability to maintain a sense of self-awareness while bridging beyond our own relational space engaging with others, playing in the space between us. In his book *Improvisation, Creativity, and Consciousness*, Ed Sarath presents the idea that "jazz's improvisation-based process scope renders it a uniquely powerful tributary that flows not only into the overarching musical ocean but the broader oceans of creativity and consciousness" (2013, pp. 3–4). He suggests that this can be a template that can inspire and inform self-transcending movement not only in other musical genres but wide-ranging fields in and beyond the arts (Sarath, 2013). The template Sarath speaks of echoes the Living Musically template mentioned early in the chapter, incorporating three learning approaches that constitute contemplative pedagogy:

first-, second-, and third-person practices. The discussion in the previous section focused primarily on first-person approaches: guiding one's internal, subjective awareness while working with imagery, somatics, and mindfulness practices. We also engage in third-person inquiry (outside us), which is more objective, analytical, and theoretical. But it is through improvisation that we engage in second-person approaches (between us) to explore ideas, bringing a whole new way of knowing to the experience (Gunnlaugson, 2009).

Exercise 4b: Chaos to Unity Part Two

The seed idea for Part Two of Chaos to Unity is the bridge from first person, subjective, to second person, intersubjective, relationships. Students make choices based on an unfolding field of relationships, where one's personal agency creates connections between knowledge, practice, and learning.

We resume the warm-up with everyone walking through the whole space, weaving in and out at one's own pace, breathing naturally.

1. To break up the monotony the leader calls out cues: walk twice as fast; twice as fast again; now super-slow-motion, and so forth, changing things up.
2. Once returning and settling back into a normal walking pace the leader invites the group to listen to each other's footfalls—the leader senses when the time is right for the next cue.
3. Listening continues, and without forcing anything, participants observe how long it takes for everyone to naturally fall into step.

Often, at this point, without being prompted, the group slowly reshapes their path into a circle or oval as they are listening to each other's footsteps. This transition period can be challenging for some who are used to imposing their will on a situation, or others who are ready to follow, bringing up each individual's relationship to *being in time*. There are instances when the group comes together very quickly, others where it slowly transitions into entrainment, and others where it becomes an extended battle of wills before someone prevails. In one instance someone was uncomfortable walking as quickly as the group, and they chose a slower gait. Although this person thought they were remaining independent, it turned out their steps were exactly twice as slow as the others, which is actually still agreeing and falling into step. "Life adapts and changes in this way, without an inherent, permanent hierarchy, with flexibility and radical adaptation to the moment and relationships with what is around it, now" (M. Montesano, personal communication, November, 2014). The transition from pedestrian walking to entrainment brings up many issues for different people as they are negotiating their actions in relation to others through time. Participants' patience is tested as they listen without forcing change, allowing a group mind to become established. A relevant passage from number 15 in the *Tao Te Ching* captures

the essence of this: "Do you have the patience to wait / till your mud settles and the water is clear? / Can you remain unmoving / till the right action arises by itself?"

This simple warm-up structure inevitably brings up many questions. For example, one non-arts student writes about the "gray areas" and how things are not simply black or white:

> My question lies in the line between individuality and cooperation. How much must one sacrifice of themselves for the greater good of their group? How much will the group sacrifice to stay true to its constituent parts? Although there may not be finite answers to these questions, I look forward to exploring this gray area.

The understanding that things are not simply right or wrong opens the door for having nuanced experiences and discussion of the inner discernment of difference. We are moving from single states of awareness to the direct perception of differences and similarities. Playing in the gray areas between autonomy and community, holding a contradiction rather than resolving it, helps us practice sustaining contradictions.

Another student writes:

> Some of my peers and I discussed our own stubbornness in the walking exercise, choosing to stick to our own paces rather than conforming to the group. After the first day, one person said that in the end, everyone joined his pace, although it may be that he adjusted his pace just a slight amount and didn't realize it—I felt the same way, and I must remember to account for my own human error. This give-and-take between self and group corresponds to real life tensions between the individual and society.

The student's reflection also points out that reality is often resistant to simple resolution. As the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf (as cited in Zajonc, 2006) has put it, "it is precisely through the irreconcilable complexities of our lives that our identity emerges. When we deny that complexity, as a society we quickly decompose into warring ethnic and religious factions vying for dominance" (p. 6).

Creative Interaction

Creative interaction is the final stage of this practice, where we are merged with the object(s) of our attention, listening with all our senses, engaged in an unfolding experience: letting go, constantly shedding thoughts or ideas that are not palpable in the moment. We practice through repetition, focus, use of the body, and awareness of self.[5] We have seen how all sound, movement, and

markings have the ability to be used as basic means of communication or aesthetic expression—we imitate, contrast, elaborate, or fragment ideas, and play with silence-stillness-empty space. Remembering universally that nothing exists by itself but in relation to what it is next to, and that opposites generate maximum tensions, playing with two contrasting ideas can promote clarity, as we strive to communicate as clearly as possible. By practicing creative interaction we begin to see/hear/feel/taste/intuit our reality as something more than habitual existence: experiencing things as if for the first time, going from the ordinary to the *extra*ordinary, seeing the poetics in each moment.

Exercise 4c: Chaos to Unity Part Three

The seed idea for Part Three of the warm-up score consists of playing together with a common pulse, having a group rhythmic conversation, and finding an ending. We resume the score as the group has fallen into step with everyone walking to the same "beat." As this happens there is a major shift in the room, as all extraneous steps are gone and the unison footfalls pulse through the space. Out of this unison people are free to gradually "play" with the rhythm by clapping, snapping, vocalizing, stomping, and changing their foot patterns: listening to the pulse, imitating patterns heard from across the room, adding contrasting sounds or rhythms. This is a spontaneous group rhythmic conversation where awareness is seamlessly shifting from the group to the self and back; where people are negotiating through sound. Endings are perhaps the most challenging aspects of improvised music, particularly in open structures such as this. At first the instructor can cue the group to gradually find an ending; through intense listening the exercise eventually will come to a close. Through discussion and repetition of the score, or by creating new scores, we become aware of subtle cues and possibilities that increase our ability to be receptive of others, sense possibilities, and act as a group to achieve a common goal (Sarath, 2010).

This process is a synthesis of critical, creative, and integrative learning approaches that require us to find a balance between facts and the way we relate to facts. An engineering major made a connection between this practice and particle physics:

> The universe is universally made of the same material (homogeneous) and appears the same from every direction (isotropic). To this end, I have begun to perceive myself as but a small component of the whole. The periodic table of elements which culminate my being, are the same materials utilized throughout all of space and time. With this vantage point, disappearing is actually an amazing experience because it simply means looking beyond yourself and noticing all that is around you. My flow state is now easier to access because I notice everything that's around me all the time.

> I can now start to switch between my reasoned knowledge and intuitive knowledge by simply acknowledging my existence in relation to the universe and letting myself enter a flow state, where my inner critic is silent and listening.

Using improvisation to facilitate integrative learning increases opportunities for students to build across the curriculum by making connections among ideas and experiences. It also allows for the transfer of learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus into everyday life. Another student wrote:

> I compared growing in my improvisational practice to learning a new language. I have to manipulate, form connections, and really try to see beneath the surface of the meaning. In order to embody a concept I need to creatively interact with it. The group dynamics within a score changed every time we did it showing the growth as a class as well as individuals, and our increased capability to bridge beyond the self and towards others.

Over time students grow and understand how this is a flexible practice—flexible to different personal approaches and different situations. It is also an ongoing practice that often gets messy and confusing, as life often does. But the tools remain relevant. When asked to reflect on the process seven years later, a former graduate student wrote, "I find myself listening more to my subconscious thoughts and intuition and realizing their credence and importance."

Conclusion

While a course like this can be a valuable one-of-a-kind experience, the learning deepens and expands when woven through a curriculum, as in project-based curricula or instances where somatic, contemplative, or mindfulness practices are an essential part of curricula.[6] Creative learning should know no borders, and the Living Musically approach can serve as a thread that weaves through each year of a curriculum connecting concepts with lived experience. Students report that it allows them to consider, and reconsider, concepts more deeply—concepts that they either thought they understood, or had previously dismissed as simple or shallow, only to find new levels of connection and understanding.

In order to realize the benefits of the integrative and contemplative pedagogies that include first-, second-, and third-person practices, one must decrease the amount of material covered to allow time for deeper experiences. Therefore, what is gained and lost in bringing a greater emphasis on creativity to higher education? What is lost is the amount of information students learn, the breadth of information. However, there is something gained in achieving greater depth of understanding that extends into breadth in a different way. Palmer talks about how it was not until he appropriated the history of the Holocaust as a lens to

scrutinize his own life story that he realized the foundations for his own moral response to such evil.

> We need to understand why a large percentage of the people who oversaw the murder of six million Jews had doctoral degrees from some of the "great" universities of the era. We need to understand how integrative forms of teaching and learning can mitigate against educational travesties and tragedies such as this.
>
> *(Palmer, Zajonc & Scribner, 2010, p. 32)*

Integrative and contemplative pedagogies such as Living Musically provide opportunities for students to connect deeply with concepts, integrating them into the heart of their personal lived experience, thus achieving a breadth of understanding in the application of knowledge. Palmer continues:

> Giving students knowledge as power over the world while failing to help them gain the kind of self-knowledge that gives them power over themselves is a recipe for danger—and we are living today with the proof of that claim in every realm of life from economics to religion. We need to stop releasing our students into the wild without systematically challenging them to take an inner as well as outer journey. Integrative education can help us do just that.
>
> *(Palmer et al., 2010, p. 49)*

How do we promote creative practices such as Living Musically through the wider university community? Many universities have incredible transdisciplinary collaborations between sciences and arts, sustainability and arts, health-wellness and arts, community-based and socially embedded programs, as well as an ever-growing number of courses that incorporate creativity and creative learning strategies. But what happens in between the projects, in between the courses? Is it possible to create an atmosphere of creative play for faculty members to engage with other faculty across disciplines in interdisciplinary labs that support the practice of improvisation as a catalyst for dialogue? Labs that allow faculty members to share approaches through participatory experiences can stimulate new pedagogical approaches, new collaborations, and new ways of engaging with habitual material.

> Creative people feed off the energy of others; they excel when challenged and forced to confront and incorporate other perspectives and approaches; and they depend on the support and encouragement of allies and colleagues when trying out new and often risky ideas.
>
> *(Tepper, 2004, p. B7)*

Most faculty members cringe at the thought of taking on more responsibility. The idea being proposed here is based upon Tepper's vision of the creative

campus and Palmer's transformation conversations on campus.[7] While dialogue and conversations are invaluable, the labs that have been conducted at Arizona State University (ASU) show promise, as they give participants an opportunity to explore and play with ideas and frameworks with colleagues through varied modes of dialogue, different ways of knowing. Pairs of faculty members lead the sessions from different improvisational disciplines. The labs are small, transdisciplinary structured explorations and discussions of creativity and mindfulness, designed to contribute to the well-being of the faculty and university community. This open-ended, non-goal-oriented approach is an essential form of exploration and can become a fertile field of resources for curricular development and research over time. As Palmer writes:

> This kind of collegiality is not easily achieved, but neither is it impossible. The faculty I know who have invested themselves in such relationships report better learning outcomes for students and, equally important, new energy for their own academic lives.
>
> *(Palmer et al., 2010, p. 40)*

Daniel Nagrin (1994) writes that if one of the many definitions or uses of art is a "rehearsal for the life one fears, hopes, expects to live, and if one believes we are living in a swiftly changing environment, then the art form of improvisation becomes an exercise in attuning to an uncertain existence" in a rapidly changing world (p. x). It is in this larger context that the practice of improvisation can potentially facilitate a diplomatic role of uniting people. However, language itself can be a stumbling block. Each school or community has a culture that responds to certain ideas or words in unique ways. The I-Word and other words can trigger negative or positive reactions. As Labaree (2013) puts it:

> Maybe improvisation, or the I-word, as I choose to call it, causes no problems in your musical life. In my own, it is the source of daily dissonance, a major player in an often unacknowledged tug of war of meanings, musical politics, and practice within my immediate musical community . . . for example, "improvisatory" functions as a marker for what is free, irrational, or otherwise unexplainable in musical experience.
>
> *(p. 1)*

As stated on the Critical Studies in Improvisation (CSI) website:

> improvisation [itself] is a contested term. Its cultural significance is in dispute in both the academy and in the broader public understanding. [CSI] seeks to reveal the complex structures of improvisational practices and to develop an enriched understanding of the social, political, and cultural functions those practices play.
>
> *(Critical Studies in Improvisation, n.d.)*

Musical, movement, and other forms of improvisation are profoundly collaborative creative processes in which participants must *always* be listening, ready to change direction or modify their point of view in an instant, aware of themselves and their responsibility in relationship with others, while working together, free of judgment, to create a collective whole. This way of being in the world with others is a model worth striving for, as it engages learners in sustained, active, and experiential modalities that can effect deeper changes for new ways of making meaning. A Living Musically vision is a campus community where improvisational practice is established in all areas of learning, teaching, and research; building a community around the investigation and practice of approaches to transdisciplinary improvisation; and sharing these with faculty, students, staff, administrators, and other communities.

Notes

1. David Torn is an American composer, guitarist, and music producer. He is known for the organic blending/manipulation of electronic and acoustic instruments and performance techniques that have an atmospheric or textural quality and effect (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Torn).
2. This practice is common in various somatic disciplines such as yoga, tai chi, the Feldenkrais Method and the Alexander Technique, body mind centering, ideokinesis, as well as in mindfulness practices.
3. Adapted from an activity, Right Before Your Eyes, by Joanna Ziegler, as her mentee at the Contemplative Pedagogy Summer Session held at Smith College through the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, 2008. See Dustin and Zeigler (2007), pp. 154–157.
4. Students listened to the fourth movement, "Presto," of the *Chamber Concerto for 13 Instrumentalists* (1969–70) by Gyorgy Ligeti. It is 3:36 long.
5. The idea of repetition, focus, use of body, and awareness of self was something I learned from Joanna Ziegler, as her mentee at the Contemplative Pedagogy Summer Session, 2008.
6. This is the case in the dance curriculum in the School of Film, Dance and Theatre at ASU. This spiral approach helps students synthesize concepts and practices from different classes during three of their four years in the curriculum.
7. The concept of transformative conversations is central to the work of the Center for Courage & Renewal (http://www.couragerenewal.org). A brief summary of the ideas behind the Center's work can be found in a document titled "Foundations of the Circle of Trust® Approach," available at http://www.couragerenewal.org/about/foundations. For a detailed exploration of those ideas, see Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

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