Storying an Improvisational Scholar

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Abstract

> *This piece uses methods of nonrepresentational, narrative research to consider what an improvisational ethos might contribute to teacher education. The author tells and interprets stories from their career as a high school teacher, graduate student, and scholar in relation to the art of improvisational theatre in order to consider the possibility of an improvisational ethic in teacher education. The author offers an argument about what it means to be improvisational—both in terms of the work of teaching as well as conducting research.*

Keywords: improv; educational research; narrative; teacher education; pedagogy

I was a teacher for nearly fifteen years. I've been an educational scholar for nearly ten. During that time, I've also been a student and teacher of improv theatre. Recently, I stumbled across something I wrote during graduate school: "I taught high school like an improviser and I'm going to approach research the same way."

The idea that a knowledge of improv theatre might inform teaching or research is nothing new. Researcher and improviser Carrie Lobman (2006) has long argued for such an approach, suggesting that "an improv lens shifts our understanding" of teaching "from being a set of off-the-rack techniques" to activity that teachers co-create with students. Further, Lobman suggested that improv "has the potential to transform what teachers are able to do with each other, and with the children with whom they work" (p. 317).

Improv is, in its simplest form, spontaneous invention. Theatrical improv is a dramatic art in which people create unscripted theatre in groups through different games, exercises, or forms. Improv has been made popular as a comic form, and many people are familiar with the television show *Whose Line it Anyway*. While improv is undeniably joyful, improv is not inherently comedic and, contrary to common perception, improvisational practices are not without structure or discipline. Further, improv is a contested practice. There are competing theories and practices of improvisational theatre. Still, it is the improvisational ethos that can cultivated from such work that this article explores in relation to education—especially as an ethic in teaching or conducting research.

I have previously argued an "improvisational ethos" can emerge from sustained engagement with different theories and practices of improv and might cultivate a "a shared commitment to affirming and validating the existence and experience of others" (Tanner, 2019, p. 30). I use non-representational narrative research to return to my experience as a teacher and scholar to explore how such an ethos might inform education. This is not intended as a vanity project. Like Lobman (2005; 2006) and Philip et al. (2019), I suspect improv has much to offer the field of

education. Disciplined improvisers follow an ethic of improvisation that asks them to practice 1) honoring the philosophy of 'yes, and', 2) working in service to the collective, 3) sharing power with others, 4) participating without evaluation, and 5) perceiving, accepting, affirming, and building off the offering of all other participants in the improvisation. Such principles have much to offer teacher education. Indeed, Philip's (2019) worried that "the work and preparation of teachers have been increasingly defined by the discourse of control" (p. 2). Philip (2019) called for a vision of teacher learning "not constricted by the language of control" and organized instead around "principled improvisation" (p. 27).

In this article, I argue that applying an improvisational ethos to education resists languages of control through welcoming the unexpected, disrupting the neoliberal scripting of education, and offering a more vital understanding of teaching and learning. Below, I review recent literature that connects improvisation with education. Next, I describe the non-representational, narrative methodology utilized throughout this article. Finally, I proceed with storytelling and story interpretation meant to provoke thinking around an improvisational ethos in education. Ultimately, this article uses narrative research to consider the following questions:

- What are the possibilities and limitations of an improvisational ethos in education?
- What does it mean to be an improvisational teacher or researcher?

An Improvisational Ethos in Education

Over the last twenty years, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship about improvisational theatre in the field of education. This trend mirrors a move in the social sciences to explore the relationship between improv and various disciplines (Krueger, Murphy, & Bink, 2017; Lenters & Whitford, 2018; Maples, 2007; Phillips Sheesley, Pfeffer, & Barish, 2016). Many scholars see potential in studying and applying improv to their own fields. Indeed, Phillips Sheesley et al. (2016) noticed that "interest in improv comedy has recently expanded beyond comedic entertainment; the psychological, intellectual, relational, social, and even economic benefits of practicing improv comedy appear vast" (p. 159). In this section, I review work that broadly connects improvisation with education. Next, I turn to recent work that links improvisation with criticality. Finally, I explore an improvisational approach to pedagogy. This section presents these topics to prepare the reader to consider an improvisational ethos towards teaching, research, and scholarship in the vignettes below.

Improv and Education

Keith Sawyer (2004) used improv as a general metaphor for education to argue that teaching is "better conceived of as improvisational performance" (p. 12). Robert Yinger (1987) described the benefits of disciplined improvisational teaching by studying how a teacher avoided planning more than one or two days ahead so as the design each plan in relation to what happened the previous day. Specific to literacy education, Lenters & Whitford's (2018) wrote that the value of improv is that it "engages students in high stakes spontaneous interactions" and that "comedy can foster a positive approach to failure too often lacking in a world of high-stakes educational practice" (p. 126). Esposito (2016) applied the 'yes, and' philosophy to writing instruction and offered that, "applying improv as both an intellectual framework and a set of instructional practices to teaching writing reminds us that some of our best ideas come from spontaneous moments" (p.

46). King (2001) claimed that thinking about conceptually-orientated mathematics as jazz improvisation "provides some clues to how the mathematics education community" might "think about appropriate forms of curriculum and instruction" (p. 14). Towers and Martin (2009) called for "further research employing the improvisational frame" that "would enable us to gain a more nuanced understanding of the processes at play when groups interact to create knowledge of mathematics for teaching" (p. 48). This article is written in affirmation of this growing body of scholarship, but hopes to extend beyond metaphor or discrete improv activities by considering an ethic that can emerge from the sustained study and practice if improv. Such an ethic, in part, can contribute to more critical approaches to education.

Improvisational Criticality

Cornel West (1995) used jazz scholarship to describe his vision of critical improvisational scholarship. Of such a criticality he wrote:

> I use the term "jazz" here not so much as a term for a musical art form as for a mode of being in the world, an improvisational mode of protean, fluid and flexible dispositions toward reality, suspicious of either/or viewpoints, dogmatic pronouncements and supremacist ideologies. (p. 146)

Importantly, for West, jazz scholarship is not about a particular methodology or practice, instead, it is a way of moving through the world. Specifically, he described this as an improvisational mode of being. Such a way of being, for West, is radically collaborative. Indeed, he wrote:

> As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the *creative* tension within the group—tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project. (p. 147)

For West, jazz illustrates an improvisational way of living as being both collective and about challenging static social reality. A scholar that follows this jazz approach would seek criticality that is as much about unleashing the potential of emergence within a group as it is valuing the individual talents of the participants. West's description of a "jazz" way of being offers one way to imagine an improvisational ethos that asks educators and researchers to practice being flexible and suspicious of orthodoxy through participation in improvisational group activity. Ideological borders and boundaries are not policed in such work. The unexpected, different, or strange is both possible and welcomed—it is expected.

West's description of jazz as a way of being builds off and contributes to a large body of research about trying to facilitate and sustain more democratic ways of being. Indeed, Dewey (1939/2021) wrote the urgent task ahead is "to get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external" and "to realize that democracy is a reality only as it is indeed a commonplace of living" (p. 61). Dewey wrote these words as fascism spread through Europe. Dewey's urgent call seems relevant in 2021, as I finish this article. In the same essay, Dewey described the work of building democracy as "one that has to be carried on day by day" and that it must "go beyond what exists" and "continually open the way into the unexplored and unattained future" (p. 62). In other words, seeking democracy is a disciplined and improvisational quest after a future that cannot be predetermined.

Burch (2012) also imagined the improvisational nature of seeking and sustaining democracy. Like West, Burch used jazz as a metaphor to "further develop the case that jazz is uniquely endowed to reveal not only democracy's distinctive character as a personality formation but also America's distinctive character as an imagined community" (p. 168). For Burch "good jazz, like good democracy, requires environments of free exchange, discovery and surprise, spaces in which individuals are encouraged to listen, collaborate, and revise (p. 169). Burch argued towards "a jazz-infused democratic pedagogy" that invites "students to renegotiate the self/other relation and the relation between individualism and the common good, while (p. 173) also clarifying the meaning of democracy as a personal way of life (p. 173-174). For Burch, "considering these sublime possibilities" was the task at hand "to reawaken America's sense of democratic swing" (p. 174). For West, Dewey, and Burch, classrooms are the place to spark democracy. An improvisational ethos, in my view, contributes to this continually urgent work.

Philip et al. (2019) have argued that the field of education is acquiescing to an anti-improvisational reform agenda rooted in neoliberalism that seeks "generic methods for preparing *all* teachers to use generic methods to then teach *all* students" (p 260). They describe this scripting of curriculum and pedagogy as a "destructive dynamic" and urge educators and educational scholars "to engage seriously and address with all our might the historical, structural, and ideological aspects of teaching and teacher education, so we can create spaces that truly humanize students and teachers" because, for them, "humanity—ours and that of our students too, in all its complexity— and justice that are, and should be, at the core of teaching and teacher education" (p. 260). An improvisational ethos resists the scripting of teaching and teacher education, in part, because improv teaches participants to work without scripts. Instead, improvisers seek radically encourage difference without preconceived ideas about what will happen from such affirmation. Such an ethic offers an approach to take up Philip et al.'s compelling call towards embracing humanity in all of its complexity as part of the work of social transformation.

Of social transformation, Du Bois (1997) wrote that "simple knowledge" will not "reform the world" and, instead, people "must be changed by influencing folkways, habits, customs and subconscious deeds" (p. 222). Disciplined theatrical improvisation – guided by an ethos similar to the one mentioned above and discussed more below - cultivates the transformation of participants' habits and customs. An improvisational approach to scholarship, as West described it, requires a flexible ways of being. Improv is not about acquiring simple knowledge, it is about practicing how to move through the world in affirmation of difference. Cultivating such transformational habits, perhaps, can aid the work of resisting the status quo, in working against uniformity in practice and thinking. Improvisational pedagogy that promotes an improvisational ethos, in my view, could play an important role in vitalizing education.

Improvisational Pedagogy

Recent research by scholars Kevin Leander and Gail Boldt (2013) has wondered if disciplined improvisational pedagogy might be a useful response against increasing trends towards scripted curriculums. Leander and Boldt suggested an improvisational way of approaching teaching and learning might allow teachers to "make space for fluidity and indeterminacy as the nature of things" by recognizing "difference, surprise, and unfolding" that happen in ways that "are not rational or linear or obviously critical or political" (p. 43).

Powell and Serriere's (2013) described improvisational pedagogy as "the reconstitution of curriculum as embodied, experiential, and fluid, moving beyond a pre-planned syllabus or package

of materials" (p. 21). They went on to describe improvisational teaching and learning as the "unframing of curriculum" that allows "a diverse group of people to participate more fully" (p. 21) in the classroom.

Boldt (2021) extended this improvisational view of pedagogy by arguing that "teaching and learning are everywhere" and "take place irrespective of that which is understood to be curricular" (p. 28). With this in mind, Boldt argued educators should be in search of "classroom scenes of vitality" in which "teachers and researchers are aware, at various levels of consciousness, of rising and falling energy" (p. 44). This provocation asks teachers and researchers to seek an improvisational pedagogy where

> in some instances, we make use of the energy, moving with it, heightening and extending it, and we can feel attunement, vitality, flow, and momentum. In other instances, the classroom space feels disjointed, stuck, out of tune, or dead. In yet other circumstances, we ignore or even punish in response to expressions of energy, experiencing them as distractions or disruptions. (p. 31)

Such an approach to pedagogy would, to my mind, call into question traditional notions of curriculum and the teacher's role in designing prescriptive, predetermined encounters between students and material. Improvisers, as I discovered in the vignettes below, cultivate their ability to work without predetermined endpoints as well as to notice and respond to energy and momentum. The cultivation of these traits offers a different way to be in relation with people in educational contexts. Indeed, Zapata, Van Horn, Moss, and Fugit (2019) defined improvisational teaching "as an engaged relation with, or being with, the shifting texts, meanings, and affects entering the classroom" and argued that that "educators can turn to improvisational teaching" as a way to enter into "spaces of friction alongside their students as readers and writers of the diverse array of texts shaping activist movements" (p. 179). The method in this article is an attempt to experiment with such a view of educational research.

Non-Representational, Narrative Methods

Narrative research is a qualitative approach in which the author shares and interprets stories to make sense of experience (Barone, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jacobs, 2005; Lensmire et al., 2013; Moen, 2006). Anne Turvey (2012) argued that narrative scholarship makes visible "the messy and wonderfully productive complexity of classrooms" (p. 57). Many arts-based educational researchers have turned to autoethnographic storytelling as a way to understand and theorize complex experience (Barone, 2008, 2010; Barone & Eisner, 1997, 2006, 2012; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1977; Leavy, 2013; Maynard & Cahnmann-Taylor, 2010; Rolling, 2013; Saks, 1996). Zirps (2016) went so far as to make use of the genre of the postmodern novel as a way to work "between and within the worlds of theory and research" to explore "complex questions" about education (p. 3). The stories below are not fictional. They are rooted in journals and notes that documented my experience as a teacher and scholar. Still, the creative license I take in my storying of those notes below honors Zirps' (2016) experimentation with form. Specifically, the reader will encounter manufactured dialogue below. This dialogue is inspired by things students and other adults said to me that I jotted down in my journals. Still, the dialogue serves a utilitarian and aesthetic purpose—it becomes a way to invite the reader into a time and place to share my experience. I want to be clear that the storying here is a non-representational

interpretation of previous writing that documented my teaching experience, and is intended to create new thinking around improvisational ethics in education.

In order to write the vignettes below, I returned to notes—I kept journals throughout my twenty years as a high school English and drama teacher and an educational scholar. I then created a series of vignettes as a way to share my experience with improv and education. I warn the reader that my stories are purposely broad. They may want more detail in some of the vignettes. I do point to other scholarship that more explicitly unpacks elements of the stories here but, for the purposes of this article, I attempt to capture twenty years of my teaching and scholarship to consider how what Du Bois described as habits and folkways emerged in my work. I am cautious of writing a narcissistic celebration of my career in this article, but do see value in openly and honestly tracing an improvisational ethic with the reader through storytelling to provoke their own thinking about improv and education. I relied on Erickson's (1986) articulation of interpretive fieldwork to interpret both during and after the storying process. Ultimately, I make sense of the stories here by using the analytical categories of 1) welcoming the unexpected, 2) disrupted the neoliberal scripting of curriculum, and 3) conceptualizing a more vital pedagogy to explore the idea of an improvisational ethos that resists discourses of control in teacher education.

Leander & Boldt (2013) worried that representational research—the idea that activity can be objectively captured with words—is limiting and often leads to the reproduction of overcoded or prescriptive structures. Leander & Boldt offered an example of non-representative research that hoped to "foster unpredictable connections in the present for the researcher or the reader" and subvert the "that we should be seeking to represent what actually happened or to locate causality in the subject or the event" (p. 25). I follow their experimentation and want to make it clear that I'm not intending to, as Leander & Boldt wrote, "represent what actually happened or to locate causality in the subject or the event" (p. 25). Instead, this article takes what was discussed about an improvisational ethos above seriously and, modeled after previous work on improvisational literacy (see Tanner, 2017), is intended as an experience in and of itself to inspire the reader to think about the possibilities and pitfalls of an improvisational ethos in teacher education. I proceed with the nonrepresentational, emergent intention of weaving theory with experience through storytelling.

Storying an Improvisational Scholar

At Cardinal High School: An Improvisational Teacher

"Will you direct our improv troupe?" Aaron[1] asked me.

It was after school, and Aaron and a few of his friends had come to my classroom. We stood in an enormous black box theatre. This was where I taught English and drama at Cardinal High School[2]—a large, urban school in a major Midwestern city. It was 2003. I was twenty-three years old and fumbling through my first year as a high school teacher.

"Sure," I told Aaron and his friends. "But I don't know much about improv."

Aaron laughed supportively. "We'll figure it out."

Some of the students were familiar with Brave New Workshop. This local improv company, much like Second City theatre in Chicago, focused on long form improv. Unlike short form

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1. All names of students or educators are disguised with pseudonyms.

2. The names of the schools in this piece are disguised with pseudonyms.

improvisation, a style made popular by the television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, long form does not rely on games, or prescribed activities. Long form improvisation requires improvisers to create spontaneous scenes in sets that last anywhere from fifteen minutes to over an hour. The difference between short form and long form is just one example of how improvisational theatre does not refer to one discrete or agreed upon set of theories or practices.

I began attending shows at Brave New Workshop. Often, students from Cardinal were at these shows as well. Sometimes I'd sit with them. We'd laugh and groan and howl together. Without really intending to, we became serious students of theatrical improvisation.

"I want us to do that," Sarah said after watching one show on a Sunday night. "Let's create our own version of Brave New Workshop in your classroom."

"Your classroom is perfect for it, Mr. Tanner," Aaron chimed in. "It's a black box theatre."

Improv, I was quickly learning, was not a repressive space. Shocking or taboo topic often emerged during sets at Brave New Workshop.

I proceeded in good faith that we could work together to produce long-form improv in a high school. I scheduled our first show towards the end of the fall semester. We practiced weekly in my classroom after school. There were twelve students on the troupe. I was clueless when it came to leading rehearsals. Mostly, I stood in a circle with the performers and we experimented with improv games. Exercises like Zip-Zap-Zop, Vroom, and Grandma's cat[3] made us laugh. But they also made us focus on being with each other. We learned to work as a group. I was less of a teacher and more of a participant. I played with the students.

We took improv forms such as Small Town or Montage that we saw at Brave New Workshop and began to stage them. The students were amateurs. But there was such energy in our group. And these students were smart—they worked together well. Other students began coming to rehearsal to watch. We sat in my black box theatre and howled with laughter as the students figured out how to improvise with each other.

Nearly 150 audience members packed my classroom during our first improv show—I was shocked by the community engagement. I replaced desks with chairs and sat at the light board in the catwalk. The audience hung on every word as the students performed forms and structures we'd learned from watching improv at Brave New Workshop.

"That was amazing, Mr. Tanner," parents and other students said as they left the show that night. "How did you teach them to do that?"

I was flabbergasted.

"I didn't," I quickly said. "We figured it out together."

I was coming to see that was a key aspect of improv. The group always figured out things together and, more often than not, it was better not to have a preconceived outcome for what a rehearsal should accomplish.

I saw Ms. Lichtenberg in the hallway the morning after the show. She was the school's humorless principal.

"I heard about your little improv show," she told me with a frown. "I'll have to come check it out."

I laughed nervously.

Ms. Lichtenberg did come to our next show. My classroom was packed once more. During one set, Aaron asked for an audience suggestion to inspire the improv. Somebody in the audience

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3. I avoid providing detailed information about specific improv forms or games in this article, in part because the stories here are about the general ethos that emerged from the activity in question, not the activity itself. There are plenty of resources the reader could explore about improv games or forms.

shouted out "Jesus!" Aaron took this suggestion. I nervously watched as the group used material from the crucifixion story in their improv. The audience laughed, but I was worried we'd offend somebody in the crowd.

I was in Ms. Lichtenberg's office the next morning.

"I don't know what to make of your improv show, Mr. Tanner," she said with genuine confusion. "People seem to love it. And the students are working so hard to be creative. But you better watch yourself. You could get in real trouble with this."

Ms. Lichtenberg's comment was ominous. But it was also vague. Why could I get in trouble? How? Regardless, I continued directing and producing improv theatre. There was such an energy around improv. Such vitality.

Performances became major events at Cardinal High School, often drawing more people than dances or football games. People starting referring to me as the improv person. I didn't know what to make of such comments. I felt like all I was doing was giving the students permission to play with each other.

At Primville Area High School: An Improvisational Teacher

In 2008, I was recruited to teach at another high school across the city, in part, because of the success of our theatre program at Cardinal. I accepted a position as an English and drama teacher at Primville Area High School (PAHS). PAHS, like Cardinal, was a large, urban high school. By the winter of my first year at PAHS, students were eager to join my improv troupe and our shows were drawing large audiences. And my new principal, like Ms. Lichtenberg, didn't know what to make of it.

"I don't know what you did at Cardinal, Mr. Tanner," she told me one morning after an improv show. "But you need to be careful here. Our parents have high moral standards."

My principal's comments bewildered me. Did she think that improv was inherently immoral? Did she think that Cardinal was situated in a less moral community? What exactly did she mean by the word *moral*? She was so dismissive of improv as an artform.

I continued to direct and produce improv despite administrative anxiety. I used improv exercises in my curricular English and drama classes, as well as through our extracurricular theatre program. Over the years, I would cast a new improv troupe each fall. The group rehearsed weekly and performed five or six time during the school year. I became very close with these students. I was learning that improv often created a powerful connection between the participants. We were vulnerable with each other and, in turn, a trust developed between us. These relationships usually grew stronger over time.

I was also learning that improv wasn't always joyful, productive work. Creating affirmational energy in the group was hard work and required great discipline. I grew leery of the potential for improvisers to undermine each other and, subsequently, the group's momentum. I studied the work of my students closely and began to theorize improv in my own ways.

 Misconceptions about the artform or undisciplined improvisational practice hurt the improv. Students who tried to be funny often disrupted scenes. Performers who were obsessed with doing improv "the right way" became anxious because there is no "right way" to improvise. The improv suffered when performers began evaluating each other before, during, or after scenes. "They're so funny," or "she's awful at improv" or "you should've done this in the scene" became signals to me that the improvisers were not doing improv improvisationally. Instead, they were assessing whether or not their peers were doing what they thought they should be doing. Evaluation

kills improvisation. There's no right way to improvise—there's nothing that is supposed to happen—and I began to see the need for a director or teacher to create a context in which all participants could share the improv without overdetermining, dismissing, or stifling each other's work. Working in affirmation of difference as a group without a script was enormously difficult. Teaching improvisers to listen to and affirm each other's ideas and offerings proved challenging. Eventually, I collaborated with twelve students on one of my first improv troupe's at Primville to articulate a list of principles to guide our improvisational community. These tenets were as follows:

- You must perceive and accept everything your scene partner(s) says as a truth in the moment. You must listen to and investigate every idea as it appears in the scene. It is your responsibility to build off of those ideas as opposed to ignoring or negating them.
- Accept that Improv is not a performance vehicle for your personality. Improv is about (re)defining yourself as the moment allows. Anything that you do that takes the attention from the improvised moment to yourself destroys the art.
- Accept that a troupe is a mutable and organic structure that comes and goes as needed. You are not defined by the structure by which you create art. Troupes are structures that live and die but you, as an improviser, continue to grow as a performer who perceives, accepts, transforms, adds, and creates.
- Accept that you, as an individual, are not allowed to critique your fellow improvisers. A director is the only individual in who can respond critically to what happens on stage. You, as a performer, must respond creatively by perceiving, accepting, and adding. You must never destroy.
- Accept that you are one element among many in our endeavor. You must always defer to the collective ensemble. This isn't about *you*, it is about *us*. (PAHS Prov Principles, 2008)

This list of principles guided our work at PAHS. All of us, myself included, were expected to abide by these tenets. Our improv became more disciplined as I learned to coach students to follow these ethics. I began following these tenets myself. I stopped worrying about the product and learned to pay attention to the process.

My thinking and practice as a director and teacher of improvisational theatre continued to develop. There was so much possibility for vitality and joy in improv and, in turn, to apply these disciplines to my practice as a teacher and a thinker. Yes, I used improv games and activities in my high school classes. But I also began following the principles described above. I often challenged my students to do the same. My practice as an improviser influenced my teaching, so it shouldn't be surprising that improv orientated my educational scholarship.

Returning to Graduate School: An Improvisational Scholar

I returned to graduate school in the winter of 2010. Improv as an aspect of my teaching and learning felt important, even as I struggled articulate why. The journal entry at the beginning of this article illustrates that improv had come to mean something more to me than a discrete set of practices or games. The methods section of my dissertation demonstrated that as well.

In writing my dissertation, I reflected on how theories of improvisation had come to inform my work. I wrote the following about the relationship between teaching, research, punk rock, and jazz:

I used to approach my teaching like punk rock music I angrily deconstructed school con-
texts by raging against them as loudly as I could. The punk rock artist deconstructs in order
to create. This was my strategy to create learning environments that questioned normative
discourse. Whereas punk relies on destruction to create, jazz counts on improvisation and
nuance. Jazz musicians deeply explore their situation in order to create beautiful music
despite their limitations. I learned how to work within the constraints of oppressive insti-
tutions by relying on my understanding of improvisation. In order to make peace with my
teaching situations, I began to think of my teaching as jazz or improv. Indeed, it became
foundational to how I began to think about the qualitative researcher's job. (Tanner, 2014,
p. 90)

By the time I was writing my dissertation, improv had come to frame how I understood research
methodology. Not as a discrete practice or a method itself, but as a way of being that informed
how I might take up methods. Applying improv to critical ethnography, anti-racist pedagogies,
and representations of data became an essential aspect of my dissertation and has informed every
subsequent study I've conducted. An improvisational ethos that is often non-rational, embodied
and affective has come to inform how I teach, learn, and share with others. I'm certain it is here
now as I finish these broad vignettes and try to share why these stories matter below.

Improvisational Education

My purpose in the above vignette was, in Barone's (2000) words, to let my stories wax and
wane. Certainly, telling these stories across nearly twenty years—traversing both time and space—
was an interpretive act in and of itself. I have no interest in controlling how the reader experienced
these stories. Still, I proceed by considering ways these stories illustrate how a particular, sustained
and principled experience with improv theatre led to a way of being that might offer an ethic that
resists discourses of control in education. Here, I choose to pay attention to three themes available
in the vignettes: 1) welcoming the unexpected, 2) disrupting the scripting of education, and 3)
vitalizing education.

Welcoming the Unexpected

The stories here suggest that my encounters with improv cultivated my ability to welcome
the unexpected. This happened in two ways. First, the vignettes above illustrate my openness to
directing an improv troupe without any preconceptions of what such work would entail. Therefore,
I was challenged to be radically affirmational to the different theories and practices of improv that
emerged in my work with students. I was not controlled by a predetermined learning objective
and, instead, proceeded with care and discipline in good faith that learning would happen. I was
prepared to be surprised and, in doing so, my own theories and practices of improv theatre began
to emergent in more human, less prescriptive ways. It is not much of a leap to wonder how such a
process might be applied to traditional teaching and learning.

Next, the stories illustrate that, as I learned more about improv, I worked with others to
articulate a list of principles that cultivated the ability of a group—a group that included students
and a teacher—to welcome unexpected or surprising material and, really, encounters with radical
difference. Consider the principles my students at PAHS created with me. These tenets contain

five ideas that remain important to my own theories and practices of improv, as well as my approach to curriculum and pedagogy. First, the concept of "yes, and" requires the performer to perceive and accept whatever content is created in a scene. This does *not* mean the improviser has to agree with everything that emerges during an improvisation, it means that they have to acknowledge and work with the offer. Improvisers can establish new starting points by editing a scene, but once something has been stated, it is a part of the piece and must be responded to. Secondly, performers must always serve the collective. Improvisers accept and add onto whatever is generated in the moment with the faith in the group's capacity to handle that material and carry it forward. Thirdly, there are no predetermined outcomes in improv. Fourthly, the process welcomes conflict and disagreement. Ideological and discursive disputes will occur and, in fact, add content if participants engage in the affirmational mediation of difference. Lastly, contexts will change—there are always new people to work with—but the artistic process remains the same. Improvising isn't about choosing groups, it's about figuring out how to radically welcome difference. I'd ask the reader to replace the word "improviser" in the above paragraph with the word "teacher" or "student" and see how these tenets might be applied to education to promote alternative modes of being that work against increasing trends towards the scripting of practice and theory in education—to work against increasingly powerful discourses of control.

Disrupting Scripts

The stories above illustrate a theory and practice of improvisation that emerged, for the most part, outside of traditional educational contexts. This might be part of why I was able to grapple with and articulate such an ethic. It was not constrained by traditional educational expectations. Indeed, the stories above suggest that improv was at odds with the status quo of the school. Consider the reactions of both of my principals to the idea of holding regular improv shows as part of an extracurricular drama program. They had anxiety about improv and, in turn, were nervous about my teaching. Some of their trepidation might be attributed to the indeterminate possibility inherent in improv. Anything might happen in improvisational theatre. The same is true of improvisational teaching and learning.

Educators are increasingly asked to predetermine what happens in schools and classrooms. This happens through the standardization of specific outcomes, but it also happens through the scripting of curriculum and pedagogy. Schools are not designed to promote indeterminate discovery, unanticipated thinking or doing, or improvisation. This is a problem for educators who are concerned with an affirmation of difference as part of creating more just schools and society. Recall how Philip et al. (2019) have highlighted ways that the scripting of practices, ideas, and curriculum in education prompts teachers and researchers to elevate particular modes of being at the expense of others. This is an anti-improvisational trend that does much to contribute to dehumanization and injustice in teaching and learning. A messy participation in complex humanity is an essential aspect of the work of improvisers. Consider the stories above. I was challenged to embrace a "yes, and" philosophy as I encountered improv with countless groups of people over nearly twenty years during my career in education. Improv offered me a radical way to come into relation with people. The ethos that can emerge from such practice challenges participants to be radically affirmational to different people, ideas, and possibilities. Earlier in this article, I relied on Du Bois (1997) to argue that disciplined improvisational practice cultivates the transformation of one habits. Inherent in this transformation is learning how to work without a script. Improvisers do not know what will emerge from their work. But they trust a set of principles to guide their practice

and, in doing so, cultivate a set of habits that they rely on as opposed to a script, a standard, or an overly determinate objective. Teachers and educational scholars might be served in spending more time cultivating such an ethic as opposed to learning how to follow ideological and literal scripts. Such an approach to education could go a long way in vitalizing the field.

Vitalizing Education

People in the stories above gravitated towards improv. This was certainly true of students who auditioned for my troupes and enrolled in my drama classes. It also included parents, students, and other faculty who attended improv shows. I was always astounded by community support for the improv performances I produced in schools. These shows provided spaces for diverse groups of people to connect, laugh together, and participate in spontaneous creativity. I came to think these things were sorely needed in increasingly rigid and standardized schooling environment such as Cardinal and PAHS. Improv classes, rehearsals, and shows were, more often than not, vital events in these schools.

I return to Boldt's (2021) claim that educators need to seek out classroom scenes of vitality in which teachers and researchers are aware of and reacting to the rise and fall of a group's energy. So much of the work of improv theatre is paying attention to and sharing energy. Improvisers pay attention to the energy of scenes in order to find moments to join, add on, or cut a particular moment. As a director of improv, I promote and work with the energy of improvisers through the way I facilitate games, exercises, and improv forms. This might be part of what draws people to improv—it is a permissive space where it is okay to express and participate in an exchange of energy. Boldt argued that educators often ignore or even punish expressions of energy. Energetic exchange is seen as a distraction or disruption. An improvisational approach to education is less about specific strategies and more about ways of being together, an ethic. The teacher with an improvisational ethos works on their practice to explore how they might expand their ability to accept, understand, and build off encounters between people and ideas in classrooms.

Towards an Improvisational Ethos in Teacher Education

I performed a set of improv with a group of other scholars at a recent conference. Our audience was made up of other teacher educator scholars. I was so nervous that people would be offended or dismissive of the set. Maybe some were. But a scholar I respected approached me after the performance.

"That was so important," they told me. "We need to find spaces to resist neoliberalism through playing with each other. Your improv was a space like that."

I return to the question I have asked throughout this article: What does it mean to be an improvisational teacher and scholar? There are countless ways to answer that question. Here are a few. First, an improvisational scholar works in radical affirmation of difference. They do not enter into thinking or practice with others with a predetermined outcome in mind. Instead, they welcome whatever is brought to the moment and challenge themselves to work with—to "yes, and"—different modes of being. Next, an improvisational scholar is willing and eager to disrupt ideological or practical scripts. There is nothing that is supposed to happen. The improvisational scholar welcomes surprise, the unexpected, or the strange. Finally, an improvisational scholar works to theorize and practice an ethos that provokes them towards vitality. They pay attention to and promote the rising, falling exchange of energy. The improvisational scholar, then, does not suppress or

dismiss the affective energies of the group. They enter into them and participate in search of new modes of thinking, feeling, being, and doing in relation to students or a field. All of these directions, to my view, contribute to the project outlined by Philip (2019) to resist languages of control in teaching and learning.

I continue to struggle with articulating and understanding the ways that improv has come to matter in my work as a teacher and scholar. I do not see this article as some celebration of my practice or thinking. Instead, it serves as a rumination on what an improvisational ethos is and how it might challenge teachers and researchers to resist languages of control in teacher education. Hopkins (2014) worried that school is often joyless and oppressive, in part, because classrooms are not concerned with "joy and existential possibility" so much as a "deficiency of individuals in need of being fixed" (p. 112). Disciplined improvisors choose joy and possibility over deficiency in their thinking and practices. Disciplined teachers and educational scholars might make the same choice.

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