Potential in Play: Vygotskian Educational Theory, the Anatomy of Creative Play, and Improvisation as a Model for the Liberal Arts

Jamie Sandel

Introduction

There is a traditional answer to this question [of why we teach]. It runs thus: the mind is an instrument; you first sharpen it, then use it. . . I have no hesitation in denouncing it as one of the most fatal, erroneous, and dangerous conceptions ever introduced into the theory of education. The mind is never passive; it is a perpetual activity, delicate receptive, responsive to stimulus. You cannot postpone its life until you have sharpened it.

— Alfred North Whitehead, “The Aims of Education” (6; italics added)

In his essay “Improvisation and Pedagogy: Background and Focus of Inquiry,” George Lewis poses a simple question: “How can we extend the ways in which methods of improvisation developed in music can migrate to inform pedagogy in other fields?” (2) Arts education is often used as an easy example of improvisational pedagogy in action, especially in the context of improvised music or theater. Yet it is somewhat less frequently that we ask how improvisation can be fundamental to an educational approach on an overarching institutional or philosophical level, or whether critical improvisation studies could offer a model through which to conceptualize the educational utility of the liberal arts writ large. The purpose of this paper, which draws from existing scholarship on pedagogy and creative play, is to examine how improvisation is woven into the pedagogical fabric of modern liberal arts education.

Although undergraduate liberal arts education is a significant facet of modern higher education, its foundational literature is proportionally sparse. Scholarship abounds with accounts of what liberal arts education can accomplish; the diversity of approaches to and applications for liberal arts pedagogy is clear, as is evidenced by the vibrancy of groups like Wabash College’s Center of Inquiry and the Association for the Advancement of Liberal Arts Colleges. Yet rather than deriving from one foundational text or model, the pedagogical thrust of the liberal arts seems to emerge from many approaches, unified under the tenets of breadth, synthesis and adaptability. The boundaries of liberal arts thought are dynamic and rapidly expanding—fitting for a discipline reliant on combining various methodologies from across the arts and sciences. But, valuable as its dynamism might be, it is still necessary to frame approaches to liberal arts pedagogy conceptually, to provide some sense of organization and structure. Consideration of the liberal arts as fundamentally improvisational can provide that structure.

In the words of Tom Coburn, liberal arts pedagogy “seeks freedom through creativity, through reshaping and improving on the past in order to give new meaning to the present” (“Nattering Nabobs,” n.p.). This refrain is a fairly consistent one in liberal arts scholarship: one’s ability to create a coherent and novel conclusion (in the present) stems from one’s training and lived experience (in the past). The conceptual synthesis and methodological adaptability
demonstrated in that process are close parallels to those in many improvisatory processes, and training in one benefits the other. The liberal arts student and the improviser both rely on their ability to synthesize context and training to appropriately respond to the needs of the moment.

Scholarship indicates that the development of that ability is of direct consequence to individual ownership of learned material and the ability to contextualize that material within social frameworks. In other words, it produces conscientious, effective, and invested scholars. In their 2002 essay “Creating a Common Voice for Liberal Arts Education,” Charles Blaich and Mauri Ditzler argue that “creative, thoughtful, and flexible ‘improvisation’ in the face of a complex world” is the greatest asset of a liberal arts education, and one that is increasingly important in the current era (27). A student who has spent a considerable amount of time learning how to best adapt to the needs of others and the demands of unfamiliar situations is inherently better-equipped to engage with scholarship in a time when “hugging tradition”—applying outdated or static logic to new challenges—is hardly sufficient to meet the demands of an expanding global, digitally interconnected community (Allan).

My thoughts on this parallel produce two points. One is simply the proposition that improvisatory skill ought to be considered as crucial to a complete liberal arts education as the ability to carefully compose and edit. Such improvisational skill might be conveyed through any number of pedagogical media, not just artistic ones. In turn, an expanded pedagogical understanding of improvisation can be applied to problem-solving across disciplines. The second proposition is a more theoretical one: that creative play models can help us more clearly articulate the core tenets of liberal arts philosophy, and in turn guide its trajectory moving forward. The liberal arts student is training themselves as an improviser: They are building a vocabulary of diverse skills to support their ability to synthesize and collaborate in the moment, focusing more on versatility than on a discrete, familiar, imitative skill. And conceptualizing the liberal arts student as an improviser connects collegiate classroom pedagogy to the world of improvisational teaching and creative play.

**Teaching Learning: The Anatomy of the Improvisational Moment and Its Close Parallels in The College Classroom**

I have found a trove of incisive scholarship on the intrapersonal, phenomenological, and even metaphysical nature of the improvisatory moment in the writings of University of Michigan Professor Ed Sarath, whose work on jazz education has dovetailed with his work in meditative studies to produce important theoretical implications for improvisation studies. His practical frameworks for how we engage with the complex act of improvising allow for his ideas to be translated fluently between performance-based and educational contexts.

In “A New Look at Improvisation,” Sarath suggests that “the improviser experiences time in an inner-directed, or ‘vertical’ manner, where the present is heightened and the past and future are perceptually subordinated.” Adding his voice to the perpetually unresolved debate about improvisation’s place in a creative studies discourse that largely privileges composition, Sarath contrasts improvisation to what he terms the “expanding temporality” and “temporal projections” of composed work (“A New Look At Improvisation” 1). His articulation of the unique and valuable
mindfulness employed in improvisation, and the specific temporality of that mindfulness, allows for a highly distinct conceptualization of improvisational thought independent of reductive comparisons to other forms of thought. Put simply: this improvisational thinking is a unique cognitive exercise that occurs when an individual perceives, comprehends, responds to, and plays back into a process (dialogue, performance, debate, etc.) in a tight temporal window.

This conceptualization complicates the assumption that “improvisation” is simply a synonym for “spontaneous composition.” The improvisatory moment, Sarath insists, involves a fundamentally different process from a protracted compositional one involving retrospection and revision; its priorities, fundamental action, and goals are entirely distinct. The improviser’s temporal frame forces them to develop a relationship to the context of their creation that is simply impossible for a composer to achieve—a relationship which includes what Sarath terms a sense of the “eternal present”: a state of mind in which the concept of a past-present-future continuum is de-emphasized in order to heighten mindfulness of the present moment. While a composed and edited product can be shaped or “encoded” after the fact by various contexts and inputs, the improvised product is immutable and true to its source. In this way, the product of an improvisational process is necessarily a reflection of the circumstances of its creation and a powerful imprint of a particular moment in time (Sarath, A New Look, 3). The perceptual subordination of past and future that Sarath describes is not an abandonment of the improviser’s prior lived experience, but rather an understanding of it in its present actualization, a momentary convergence of potentialities into the most real moment possible—that is, a moment most reflective of how we experience each other in the “vertical” moments of our day-to-day lives.

In “Improvisation for Global Musicianship,” Sarath utilizes Alfred North Whitehead’s model of the “learning cycle” to describe what we could think of as the pedagogical “nuts and bolts” of musical improvisation. In his essay, Sarath details the three phases of the model, romance, precision, and generalization:

In the romance phase, students are encouraged to explore, invent, imagine, and create, essentially developing a reverence for the subject without the technical constraints often placed upon them prematurely in modern learning approaches. The experience of fascination and exploration will greatly enhance the implementation of the later precision phase in which more detailed exploration occurs. Both romance and precision phases then culminate in a generalized mastery of the subject where intuition and intellectual analysis merge. (25, italics added)

Whitehead’s theoretical framework is a good fit for improvisation pedagogy. The articulation of the romance stage, in which no complex skills are developed but a personal investment in the material is solidified, places a strong emphasis on process over product, trusting that the quality of the product will reflect a robust investment in the process. Sarath notes that “orientation toward process does not preclude focus on content. . . . A process-based model embraces the study of content by placing it in the context of inventive activities” (26). The benefit of this model is a re-prioritization of process within discourse on pedagogy, in which process is assumed to have intrinsic value, rather than merely being a means to an end.
Perhaps the most important result of this processual focus is that it places a high value on the relationship of the individual with their craft. “Process-oriented learning reflects the cultural trends of one’s social and physical environment,” Sarath suggests. “This gives meaning and relevance to their work: it is a commentary on one’s self, one’s time, and one’s place” (“Global Musicianship,” 26). In no instance is this truer than during improvisation, in which the result of an action is so closely influenced by the context in which it is performed.

This critical, individualized self-expression that improvisation facilitates is of material benefit to countless educational approaches, particularly in modern pedagogical contexts where educators seek to dismantle structures of cultural hegemony. In her paper “Critical Multicultural Education and Students’ Perspectives,” Sonia Nieto notes that “in many schools learning starts not with what students bring but with what is considered high-status knowledge, with its overemphasis on European and European American history, arts, and values,” the acquisition of which is largely dependent on passive consumption or direct imitation (182). The content and context of this hegemonic pedagogical approach makes it difficult for any student to feel that they are in meaningful dialogue with the material, particularly if the student belongs to a marginalized group. In response to this, modern multicultural education pedagogy—often under the banner of “Critical Multicultural Education”—places a high emphasis on the unique positionality of the individual student, seeking to explore educational models that allow their personal expression of that positionality to both provide inroads into the subject matter and to enrich their classmates’ understanding of their perspective. Improvisational contexts, usefully, require some degree of personal expression of and iteration on the subject matter, and more often than not call for peers’ reactions to and engagement with that personal expression.

The potential benefits of this relationship between self, process, and product are many. They include, as I’ve outlined, cultural awareness, connection to others, attention to the needs of the moment, and—perhaps above all—individual investment in the entire life cycle of a product. This investment creates a personal responsibility on the part of the creator (here, the student) to have the quality and character of both process and the product measure up to their own standards.

My argument that improvisation is a guiding principle for the liberal arts is fundamentally supported by Sarath’s model. The anatomy of the improvisatory act, as he articulates it, involves an appreciation of temporality that is of tremendous use to a student who is preparing themselves to deal with the unexpected and unusual. The synthetic and spontaneous mental acumen required to truly excel in the liberal arts is directly supported by this training, as is the individual’s responsibility for their own learning. Indeed, improvisation is already at the heart of the liberal arts concept. The emphasis on the personalized classroom experience at liberal arts colleges, in which the student is asked to participate “on their feet” in a specific moment of dialogue and comprehension, stands out against more passive formats sometimes associated with large lecture classes. Typically, in these large lecture classes, the educational moment is dedicated to the dictation of information, and the student’s individual engagement with the information is relegated to a different temporal space through studying or writing papers. That passive format values the accrual of knowledge and productive personal work, but for various reasons (often by necessity of scale due to large student-professor ratios), it does not prioritize
training in which students are challenged to engage in real time with the ideas being expressed in their current class session.

**Child’s Play: Vygotskian Theory as a Structure for Improvisation Pedagogy**

*Creative play* is a highly dynamic, context-dependent cognitive exercise, fueled by spontaneity and self-expression yet nevertheless constrained by rules constructed or agreed upon by its participants. To say that improvisation is a component of creative play would be insufficient; in truth, creative play is, fundamentally, a form of improvisatory practice. The abundance of modern research on creative play in children provides theoretical inroads to improvisation scholarship that can apply to all ages and weaving together the two concepts allows us to develop a holistic approach to improvisation in educational contexts.

Play has been a noted element of improvisation discourse at least since the publication of Stephen Nachmanovich’s *Free Play*, a widely regarded early text in improvisation studies. Nachmanovich notes that “improvisation. . . [and] all creative acts are forms of play, 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” (42). Nachmanovich’s understanding of play as a concept is deliberately abstracted to the most spiritual or conceptual level: he defines it as “the free spirit of evolution, doing and being for its own pure joy”—a *funktionslust*, or pleasure of doing, that is devoid of practical mooring to a specific goal or pre-ordained process (43).

Despite his tendency towards ruminative, uncritical writing, Nachmanovich presents certain pieces of theory saliently, such as the concept of *bricolage*, or adaptability in the face of limited resources. “The very predicaments brought on by a limited field of play,” he notes, “ignite the essential surprises that we later look back on as creativity” (86). In improvisation, this is sometimes considered as manipulation of “parameters” for play.

Nachmanovich finds perhaps unlikely company in sports scholars, many of whom iterate directly on the concept of bricolage with regard to the strict rules that govern athletics. In the *Journal of Sport History*, Richard Gruneau notes that creating “binding” rules for play “insulate[s] the activity from the society at large,” setting the tone of the play scenario with deliberate and calculated artificiality through referees and rulebooks. Such restrictions are not arbitrary—they are “cultural products that stem from the collective social experiences of the participants”—yet they contain a measure of arbitrariness in order to distinguish themselves from their participants’ social experience, by forcing the *bricolage* of available actions or resources (68). In basketball, for instance, the point guard must consider the team’s pre-determined plays in the context of the defensive action of the opposing team, while simultaneously maintaining control over the ball. This context demands a special sort of dynamic reasoning and creativity that accommodates the given restrictions—the out-of-bounds line, rules against traveling and fouls, the shot clock—and finds inventive and effective solutions within them. The notion of limitation is seemingly paradoxical in a discipline predicated on freedom and agency, but in most cases creativity actually flourishes when choices are limited. This concept is crucial to approaching improvisation as a pedagogical tool, as I will touch on later.
Creative play and the primacy of the individual are not new concepts in educational theory. Many modern educational scholars cite the work of Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky as a foundation when discussing the role of creative play in early childhood learning, largely because of how his work foregrounds those principles, and such modern scholarship—most notably the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum spearheaded by Dr. Elena Bodrova and Dr. Deborah Leong—have recently attracted significant attention from the educational research community via case studies (Bodrova; Diamond; Imholtz). Vygotsky’s theories, despite being largely intended for the field of child psychology, can be extrapolated to larger principles that hold significance for undergraduate education as well as early childhood education.

Vygotsky’s trajectory within the educational canon is a long and convoluted one. Published in the 1920s and 1930s but censored by Soviet authorities, Vygotsky’s papers were re-published after his death in the 1960s to a wider readership. They rapidly gained recognition in academic circles but were not widely acted upon due to a combination of their “deep hypothetical nature” and the conservative educational climate of the era (Davydov 1). But the “democratization” and reform movement of Soviet education during 1980s perestroika marked a turn toward individualism, and Vygotsky’s texts became a touchstone for that movement, championed by Russian psychologist and academic Vasily Davydov, whose “pedagogy of cooperation” aligned closely with Vygotsky’s interpersonal and collaborative approach to education (Davydov 20).

In his 1933 essay “Play and Its Role in the Mental Development of the Child,” Vygotsky establishes a number of foundational concepts concerning the progressive structures of creative play for different age groups, focusing on the rule-based frameworks that children construct for themselves during play. Vygotsky stresses that self-guided free play is, despite its nominal freedom, a process through which children develop tools for “self-restraint and self-determination,” and coordinate systems of productive regulation (bricolage, in Nachmanovich’s terms). Furthermore, Vygotsky writes, play serves as a useful theater in which children can exercise “the negative of [their] general, everyday behavior,” approaching issues of identity through performance rather than pre-conceptualizations; in other words, children can ‘try on’ an identity and experiment with new behaviors in a low-risk environment. This context encourages action-forward strategies rather than the thought-forward (or, to borrow Vygotsky’s terminology, “meaning”-forward) strategies that are sometimes expected from ‘well-socialized’ children in educational contexts that privilege strict rule-following and verbal articulation of abstract concepts (Vygotsky, “Play” n.p.).

This concept of “performative identities”—conceiving of one’s own identity through action rather than rumination—is material to modern performance studies discourse. Tracy McMullen brings it into dialogue with the work of language scholar J. L. Austin, gender scholar Judith Butler, and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories are often used to support a common concept in Performance Theory discourse: that speech acts, theatricality, and other forms of representative action are employed in the moment to define and shape the conceptions of identity that will, crucially, inform future action (McMullen, 21-33). Discussing the chicken-or-egg debate of gender identity and gender performance, McMullen quotes Butler: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 34). Intellectual and philosophical self-
realization and self-determination in an educational context, like in most contexts, follow a similar pattern as identities of gender, cultural grouping, race, etc.: they are actively, incrementally, continuously constructed. Creative play, housed in play frames that reflect the public sphere but lack its stakes, allows students to improvise possible new selves in a safe setting—where they are not beholden to those performances to the same degree that they would be otherwise.

Despite its lack of empirical support from research at the time of its publication, Vygotsky’s early work remains a jumping-off point and touchstone for many educators and researchers like Bodrova and Leong, as it provides useful structure for understanding the pedagogical relevance of creative play. Vygotsky’s theories elucidate how the improvisatory elements of creative play help explore the child’s “unrealized desires” and “[relate] his desires to a fictitious ‘I’”—to his role in the game and its rules.” He emphasizes that play is a vehicle for advancement on the developmental continuum between dependence and independence; that “a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play—achievements that tomorrow will become his average level of real action and his morality” (Vygotsky, “Play” n.p.). This process of discovery and subsequent familiarization, he explains, is how individuals discover new values and desires. But a cognitive leap is necessary in order for a child to extend their horizon beyond their lived experience and into an imagined experience, and that leap is often externally facilitated. That process is crucial in the anatomy of creative play, where the familiar is abandoned in order to discover something new.

That distance between the familiar and the unknown was coined by Vygotsky as the “zone of proximal development” (or ZPD), a learning gap that is bridged by a combination of the student’s improvisatory courage and the instructor’s careful direction (Bodrova). Vygotsky’s theories have special pedagogical relevance due to the specificity of the latter element, the instructor’s guidance, and how it interacts with the student’s improvisation. As previously discussed, structured bricolage is as crucial a component of improvisation as spontaneity; many of the defining characteristics of an improvisation stem from its rules and restrictions. How these rules are set, however, can be an essential part of the teaching process.

Some structure stems naturally from the child’s own experiences and the nature of the contexts imitated in play. Vygotsky writes:

> I think that whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules—not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation. Therefore, to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, i.e., as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible. If the child is playing the role of a mother, then she has rules of maternal behavior. The role the child plays, and her relationship to the object if the object has changed its meaning, will always stem from the rules, i.e., the imaginary situation will always contain rules. (“Play” n.p.)

In the situation Vygotsky describes, the rules of play emerge from the play itself, taking cues from various social contexts familiar and foreign, and require the child to exercise a high degree
of empathy and creativity. He insists that this dynamic—one closely shared with improvisational practice, especially theatrical improvisation—contributes to the child’s sense of self-determination and self-reliance, which in turn holds “significance to the child’s general development and maturation [. . .] the most authentic, truest creativity” (“Imagination and Creativity,” 11). By identifying contrasting lived experiences and stepping into them for a time, the student discovers where they ultimately want to remain. This is a pattern that occurs from the preschool level to the graduate level—from a child discovering their desire to be an astronaut to a young adult realizing that they are drawn to a particular method of thought practiced in one of their college courses. It is this sort of “trying on” that allows many young professionals to determine the course of their careers.

Not all structure in creative play can be internally or naturally generated, however. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) further developed Vygotsky’s theories by stipulating the ways in which a more structured play environment can “scaffold” the play process with modeled behaviors while still maintaining the primacy of the child’s own agency in their own learning process (89-100). “Scaffolding” is the implementation of certain rules or modeled behaviors by an experienced teacher that help the student traverse the zone of proximal development, performing behaviors and reaching conclusions that would otherwise be inaccessible or incomplete because of the student’s lack of experience in the subject. Wood, Bruner, and Ross frame the scaffolding process using multiple approaches—recruitment, reduction in degrees of freedom, direction maintenance, marking critical features, frustration control, and demonstration—each of which engages the learner around a different facet of a difficult developmental leap. These activity-specific stages of development are not unique to children: educators in higher education have applied a nuanced approach to student ZPD and stages of learning to the challenge of targeting particular levels of student comprehension in college courses (“Vygotsky’s Theory”).

Wood, Bruner, and Ross’s research strongly supports the notion that improvisation is a preferable pedagogical tool to simple demonstration and imitation. They note in their study that children generally feel uncomfortable directly imitating behaviors that are significantly more advanced than theirs. An improvisatory leap, informed by the instructor’s behaviour but ultimately built on the student’s intuition and prior knowledge, is required to bridge the ZPD. While this research directly concerns early childhood educators and largely deals with the improvisation inherent in children’s creative play, its interaction with the anatomy of creative play can be convincingly ported to any scenario in which a mentor and pupil play together to elevate the pupil’s level of comprehension. The Socratic method of discussion, collaborative musical mentorship (in which a younger musician learns from a mentor while playing together “on the bandstand”), and role-plays in the classroom are all powerful teaching tools when harnessed by an experienced teacher leading a comparatively inexperienced student.

**Cognition and Conversation: Psychological and Social Ramifications of Improvisation Pedagogy**

The breadth of empirical psychological conclusions on the cognitive benefits of creative play remains limited. In a 2013 review published in *Psychological Bulletin*, Angeline Lillard reviews all
notable research on the cognitive benefits of creative play, seeking to empirically ascertain whether or not a causal relationship exists between the frequency and depth of play in a child’s experience and their intelligence (27). Her team finds that the compiled literature offers no satisfying conclusion, and that individual studies are frequently plagued by confirmation bias. But they do note that, in several studies, researchers find a strong correlation between children’s practice of fantasy play and their ability to extend logical processing beyond their expectations and lived experience—the exact sort of flexibility that Vygotskian theory details in relation to the ZPD (Lillard 1). Further psychological research is required to determine whether these correlations are causative or simply correlative (and potentially influenced by a third variable). There is promise, however, that future multisite, comprehensive studies will yield a more standardized and conclusive body of literature on the topic (Russ 144).

In lieu of definitive conclusions regarding the cognitive benefits of creative play for an individual, we may simply observe the ways in which improvisation provides a viable structure for interpersonal communication. Vygotskian theory largely assumes that “development cannot be separated from its social context,” and that any educational principle must be framed in the context of classroom or personal social interaction (Bodrova, n.p.). A crucial element of improvisation, especially for young people who are forming new social networks, is communication and empathy; through creative play, children learn to understand lived experiences that are not their own.

Musical performance is a clear example of this sort of cultural dialectic. Two musicians improvising together must not only agree on some sort of musical context to ground their performance, but they must also be actively and attentively aware of their collaborator’s creative identity—a seemingly flash-pan judgment on personal and musical aesthetics that nevertheless yields important insights on what Matthew Sansom terms “self-construction.” That construction, Sansom explains, derives from “individual aesthetic preference and certain emotional needs,” alluding to the deeply personal nature of musical collaboration and the empathetic requirements of improvisation (Sansom, 3). Sansom’s terminology overlaps with Vygotsky’s when it comes to improvisation’s power to help shape emergent self-identity: by connecting with the momentary needs of others, the individual is able to feel out their own needs and priorities.

The pedagogical utility of a form that requires an involved personal connection to others should be obvious. An experienced group improviser is necessarily an individual who has experience meeting others where they are, someone who is trained in reconciling different approaches in the interest of a cohesive final product. Similarly, liberal arts pedagogy also relies on an interpersonal dynamic, and, in its best forms, enables students to approach even the most complex cultural or conceptual intersections with an open and receptive mind. Still, in an educational context in which improvisation is well-implemented, students are encouraged not to lose their personal perspective during these exercises in empathy. “Achieving learning outcomes,” as James P. Barber and his colleagues explain, “requires shifting frames of mind from authority dependence to ways of understanding one’s experience that reflect more complex meaning-making capacities” (868). In other words, the autonomy of improvisatory training is dependent on a continued sense of self as one attempts to derive meaning from the experiences of others.
The ramifications of that shift towards meaning-making founded on the student’s personal experiences are both numerous and noteworthy—particularly when considering the significance of pedagogy within social and cultural power structures.

**Experimentation and Empathy: Improvisation, Social Theory, and Multiculturalism**

In his preamble to *Improvisation, Community and Social Practice*, George Lewis poses the question of how “cross-cultural models of learning and teaching extend experimental learning and teaching methods.” He asks, “What kinds of new social models will result from such initiatives, and what can be gained from theorizing these newer models of music making?” (3) The liberal arts is one of the most fecund trial grounds for this potential that Lewis describes, in large part because of how readily a liberal arts environment welcomes the “play frames” required to improvise new modes of social interaction. Play frames, as first defined by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, are social theaters in which behavior can be “tried on” (a Vygotskian term) and tested in a safe environment free of ordinary consequences—where, to employ a metaphor more canine than sapient, “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite” (186). The play frame serves as a Vygotskian zone of proximal development, allowing individuals to experiment with behaviors and ideas in a highly “vertical” environment (in Sarath’s language) with minimal ramifications. The classroom is the ideal place for such play frames: students may explore new ideas using their peers and teachers as sounding boards, nuancing and valuing their own ideas in relation to the instantaneous demands of the classroom. These social mechanics are precisely those of the improvisatory process.

In his essay “Vygotsky’s Contribution to Pedagogical Theory,” James Britton notes that “if shared social behaviour (of many kinds, verbal and non-verbal) is seen as the source of learning, we must revise the traditional view of the teacher’s role. The teacher can no longer act as the ‘middle-man’ in all learning—as it becomes clear that education is an effect of community” (25). Britton’s interpretation of Vygotsky’s work consists largely of the notion that for an educational environment to be effective, the student must represent concepts to himself “in his own terms.” But essential to this ownership, he insists, is some sense of social place: “It is not just that the child must make his knowledge his own, but that he must make it his own in a community of those who share his sense of belonging to a culture” (25). We can read Britton’s analysis as one half of a cycle, in which individualized (and, for our purposes, play-based) learning produces social context, and is simultaneously produced by the same context. This sort of exchange, he explains, takes place in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, the “lending [of] consciousness” from teacher or peer to student (25).

This process becomes doubly important—and doubly complicated—in social contexts like the United States, where a given educational milieu might consist of a variety of ethnic, religious, circumstantial, and economic backgrounds. The beauty of improvisation pedagogy, as I noted in a prior section, is that it is constantly self-revising: the introduction of new cultural or social information to the experience of a participant becomes a new element of play. While education in an improvisational, play-based setting might engage textual resources or codified pedagogy,
the ultimate conduit for the information (the teacher and the learning environment) is necessarily personal and temporally specific. An important result of this specificity is that it allows multicultural education to avoid the pitfall of vague token representation. Nieto writes that “a critical multicultural education builds on students' interests without trivializing (or essentializing) the meaning of culture.” In such a context, a particular cultural perspective is not a bullet point on a lesson plan; it is the lived experience of the student, and is therefore material to every part of the lesson (193). Any lesson plan reliant on active improvisation by students will inevitably be refracted through the prism of the students' cultural experience, wherein becoming more effective, nuanced, and empathetic than it ever could have been without that refraction.

The ramifications of this educational model extend beyond simply benefiting the student's personal growth; it arguably has the potential to fuel an emancipatory approach to education that challenges entrenched structural oppression. Emphasis on the individual student's lived experience through improvisation, especially when framed as an antithesis to hegemonic approaches centered on passive consumption of fixed high-status knowledge, draws parallels to what philosopher-educator Pablo Freire terms the “struggle for humanization” by oppressed people. In his foundational work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire describes that latter approach as a “banking concept” of education, wherein the teacher dispenses information to their students that is assigned value unilaterally by the institution, and by extension the dominant culture. “The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable,” Freire writes, “his task is to 'fill' the students with the contents of his narration—contents which are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance” (71-72). The philosophies behind the models of improvisation pedagogy I've outlined hew directly against the banking concept in education, which supposes that students are empty vessels to be filled with the right kind of knowledge. Improvisation pedagogy is predicated on the idea that the student's experiences and personal truths are so valuable as to be necessary for the acquisition of any further knowledge. No identity is subaltern in educational settings where active, individualized improvisation is properly and earnestly integrated.

The critical pedagogical discourse galvanized by figures like Freire and Franz Fanon has been developing since the mid-20th century, but it is no less relevant in our present moment. U.S. higher education is in a moment of structural reckoning in which there is a pressing need for play frames and scaffolded empathy. Nationwide, student organizations representing marginalized identities are clamoring for institutions to address toxic academic and social environments—specifically, environments in which their lived experiences are made invisible. My own alma mater, Amherst College, experienced a particularly powerful instance of this effect during “Amherst Uprising,” a days-long occupation of our library in which students of color voiced their struggles within the College community. Over the course of four days, I witnessed and participated in countless instances of improvisatory collaboration under extreme duress, in the form of impromptu administrative meetings, ad hoc theaters for sharing personal accounts of injustice, and situation-specific, adaptive group discussions and breakout groups (“Amherst Uprising”). While improvisation might not have been explicitly noted as a central force in the Uprising protest, it was fundamental for this social intervention.
Such moments of cultural learning and reform organization are not unique to the Amherst community. The protests of racial injustice at Mizzou and Yale in the fall of 2016 were the impetus for Amherst’s action, and Amherst’s own action, as well as its resulting media attention, will surely model a course of action for future student activist groups (Pearson; “Amherst Uprising”). As individuals continue to advocate for their rights to equal opportunity and affirmation of identity, higher education institutions would be well-served to educate their student bodies in methods that are suited to engaging with the “radical compassion” and the interpersonal dialogue required by these movements. The second crucial step in that process is to foster environments where students, playing together in discussions and acts of self-expression (artistic, verbal, or otherwise), are able to recognize each other as teachers, and to scaffold each other’s learning using their unique familiarity with different experiences. If Britton is correct that “education is an effect of community” in which people must learn concepts “in their own terms,” it is clear that students must be prepared to become students or teachers at any moment, without a lesson plan or class notes.

Looking Outwards, Looking Forwards: Improvisation as a Tool for Modern, Global Thought

I have centered my argument thus far on where improvisation can flourish in classrooms and school communities, but I should also address the application of this pedagogical practice outside the campus. A growing refrain in scholarship on liberal arts pedagogy and philosophy is the increasing urgency of a comprehensive undergraduate education that prepares its students to be “global thinkers,” agents for change and connection in a rapidly progressing world. There are a number of contexts in which globalization is gaining dominance, most notably neoliberal economics, academics, and, increasingly, artistic culture—contexts which each feature improvisatory practice their particular way.

The former Provost of Dickenson College, George Allan, has written on the global implications of liberal arts education, noting how “diversity education’ involves not merely a subject matter to be studied but relationships to be cultivated” (n.p.). The interpersonal connectivity of improvisatory practice—artistic and academic alike—works on multiple levels of scale: the micro-level or interpersonal, as described above, and the macro-level. The macro-level can be understood as the process of integrating institutions representationally, and matching step with that representational diversity through updates to the institution’s pedagogy. In his review of modern scholarship on the progressive trajectory of the liberal arts, Allan outlines multiple crucial reforms, one of which he describes as “key to the emergence of a New Academy”: “education for pluralism,' teaching students how to interact effectively in the pluralism of pluralistic contexts in which they dwell or unavoidably soon will dwell” (n.p.). The mechanisms engaged in such pluralistic thinking, as I explore in the previous section, are in many cases highly improvisational, requiring active participation during temporally specific opportunities for communication with faculty, students, and community members.

Another priority for the liberal arts in the 21st century is a shift in educational paradigms regarding synthesis versus retention. Retention and recall were greatly prized skills in eras where accessing information was a time-consuming ordeal, but the proliferation of web-based
resources, culminating in the commercialization of cellular data networks, has undermined that valuation. 'Held' knowledge (i.e. memorized information) is still important and must be a part of any modern education—indeed, liberal arts education itself is built on a complex, interdisciplinary lexicon of terms and concepts that must be learned and retained. But it’s more or less inevitable that in an age when specialized, esoteric information (and misinformation) is available in seconds through the internet, a different skill is called for, one built on conceptual synthesis, adaptability, and discernment for informational rigor and credibility. Improvisation can be that skill. Blaich and Ditzler hail improvisation as the “perfect antidote for the diminishing shelf life of information,” (27) a trainable ability that focuses more on the processes through which one reasons rather than the materials they use to reason. Improvisation is, in this way, a tool for post-structural reasoning, giving the student tools to better understand the multiplicity of perspectives and findings on any given subject that exist in modern scholarship.

Cultural studies also indicates the promise of improvisation pedagogy in an American context. Improvisation is, in one way or another, woven into the fabric of countless cultural threads in North America, both Eurological (white) and Afrological (Black). The United States’ Eurological liberal arts birthright is fairly broadly understood: John Agresto has proposed that “America's founding in [the enlightenment ideals of] 'reflection and choice' makes [it] the world's first, and perhaps only, Liberal Arts Nation” (148). Agresto’s connection of the liberal arts with American social and historical positionality has deeper significance than acknowledging the country’s many distinguished liberal arts institutions. The dominant cultural narrative in the U.S. has contained an improvisational spirit since its genesis, prizing cultural values like independence, resourcefulness, and individuality. The liberal arts system is, in many ways, an educational manifestation of those quintessential American values.

Other cultural forms of independence through improvisation have become American hallmarks. Perhaps most notable is jazz music, a fundamentally Afrological tradition where improvisation is not only a core element of musical practice but a larger cultural theme. The personal representation and capacity for difference, disruption, and exercise of Black agency that jazz improvisation allowed, particularly from the mid-40s onward, provided a broad platform housing everything from the innovation and intellectualism of Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington to the countercultural resistance of the AACM in the 60s and 70s—to say nothing of jazz’s modern iterations on Black identity and resistance (exemplified by Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah, Moor Mother, Nicholas Payton, and others). Improvisation, housed within a specific artistic context, allowed musicians to be explicitly political, expressing their individuality in the face of the stifling oppression of white supremacy.5

As such, the components of improvisation are becoming more and more culturally relevant each decade. Daniel Belgrad describes the post-WWII “culture of spontaneity” as an active effort on the part of the cultural avant-garde to subvert the neoliberal corporate philosophy of rationality (and, I might add, the white supremacy embedded in and permuting from that philosophy). Belgrad suggests that the “cultural stance embodied in the art of spontaneity” communicates a third option other than “mass culture” and “high culture” (1). Certainly, improvisation has been instrumental in counter-culture art since at least the 1960s, when protest movements generated incredible communal shows of solidarity in the form of subversive art. That era also birthed the
AACM and other societies of third stream musicians who sought to embody the subversion they espoused (Lewis, “Gittin’ to Know”). Improvisation is, in a sense, the lifeblood of American youth, even today: Berk notes that the “net generation” is composed of inductive learners, minds that learn by doing instead of being told what to do (29).

Conversations about improvisation as a tool for growth and change are not limited to cultural or academic discourse. Mark Laver explains that, especially in the increasingly neoliberal corporate climate of the 21st century, businesses “recognize that in order to be creative corporately, they must facilitate and foment the creativity of their employees both individually and collectively” (“ImprovisetM,” 3). Recognizing this interest as a latent financial resource in an increasingly desperate music business, professional jazz musicians have formed ABIs—Arts-Based Initiatives—which provide workshops for groups of corporate employees led by improvisors, employing improvisation as a model for teamwork and creativity in the workplace.

Laver notes that, despite the exigent need for improvisatory ability in organizations centered on a capitalist earning motive, capitalism and neoliberalism themselves can be understood as “oppositional forces that can potentially hinder emancipation, democracy, and the full realization of universal human rights” (“ImprovisetM,” 2). This line of argumentation hinges on implicit assumptions that improvisation is indeed an “emancipatory” and communal practice (as articulated by Daniel Fischlin in “The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Coreation”) derived from observations about specific contexts in which improvisation is employed rather than from some essential nature of the practice itself. However, it is entirely possible that the context of improvisation is material enough to the essence of the practice as to be inextricable from it, especially given its historical place, as I have noted, in the Enlightenment and Black arts movements (Fischlin, xi). Regardless, Laver problematizes the fusion of neoliberal and improvisatory practices, whose incidental and processual elements are thought to be so diametrically opposed; the root of his scholarship on the topic is an interrogation of their perceived compatibility. He explains that the business world’s focus on (and I would suggest also its instrumentalization and even fetishization of) flexibility and innovation is born of a rapidly globalizing economic theater, the product of the last several decades of international trade and a similarly shifting American economic landscape, where the rapid, resourceful synthesis improvisation provides could be seen as a tool for minimizing conflict and maximizing profit.

I feel no particular need to distance the argument presented in this piece from the rationale presented in support of ABIs; in fact, many arguments made for that sort of training echo my thoughts on the subject regarding its utility and benefits (Scinto). There is a danger, however, in the indiscriminate commodification of improvisational acumen. If improvisation can be considered a basic human ability and a fundamental component of all systems that require spontaneous synthesis of inputs underpinned by a sense of individuality, then the fostering of the improvisational spirit becomes a human right, rather than a trade skill, and the commodification of improvisational skill as the latter directly challenges its place as the former.

These distinctions—utilitarian versus holistic, capitalist versus humanist, artistic versus business-oriented—must be included in pedagogical discourse as well. Improvisation as a pedagogical tool is employed in a plurality of contexts, including both Tools of the Mind and
ABIs, where it is imported as a special, discrete program that can be quickly and easily removed in the event of changes in management or funding. To consider improvisation as an ideal by which to fashion an entire approach to education, we must be able to imagine larger implementations of improvisational thinking than one-off seminars and workshops. In fact, I suggest that the successful implementation of improvisation in educational contexts like Tools of the Mind is best accomplished through divorcing improvisation pedagogy from such utilitarian modalities, instead understanding improvisation to be a bedrock for pedagogy, a guiding principle by which to structure an entire approach. Improvisation cannot be used; it must be adopted as a paradigm for being, doing, and understanding.

Conclusion

One common objective of the liberal arts, as expressed in relevant scholarship, is that it must offer a course of study that strengthens the overall capability of a student, such that they can enter any professional field and be well-served by their years of study. Considering that the social, cultural, economic and academic contexts of today’s college graduates are arguably much more complex, dynamic, and even volatile, than ever before, a new standard of adaptability and connectivity must be provided to those graduates if liberal arts education is to continue to follow through on its commitment to prepare them. Using improvisation as a model for a new paradigm of liberal pedagogy, I believe, is a natural and effective fit. Such a perspective would be in step with what many early childhood programs already implement through Vygotskian programs and other progressive models—and were a more sophisticated integration of improvisational ability widely established as a central tenet of a well-rounded liberal mind, a new early-childhood-through-collegiate academic paradigm, grounded in improvisation and creative play, could emerge. By fashioning pedagogical progress around notions of the liberal arts education as that of an improviser, we open doors to fresh and promising pedagogical perspectives, offering new inroads into education for creativity, adaptability, and intersectionality.

Notes

1 “Composition” here refers to the canonical western sense of the term: an act of creation not bound to a localized temporality (performance or segment of a performance).

2 “The improviser” and “the composer” are shorthand for someone practicing either improvisation or composition at any given time. Anyone can be either, or both. What concerns Sarath (and me) is how they are directing their focus, and consequentially how they are experiencing temporality.

3 This statement is obviously complicated by the fact that an improvised performance can be recorded, and that recording can be manipulated ex post facto. For the sake of my argument, and to avoid entanglement in the robust and ongoing philosophical debate about the ontology of the artistic work product, the “improvised product” refers to improvisation in its own temporal context; i.e., witnessing the improvisation in real time.
4 Gruneau, himself, poses questions about the implication of the “over-regulation” of games for their categorization as a form centered on creative play, but the fact remains that they are very effective as an illustrative tool for the basic principle of parametric constraint.

5 Various other types of inclusion can be included in the umbrella of globalization as well: race, gender, and sexuality progressivism, while a quite distinct movement from globalization, oftentimes follows its arc. I will discuss them together at times.

6 In a sense, this anti-hegemonic resistance is a parallel in the professional artistic sphere to what Freire describes in the classroom: a resistance to prescriptions of value enforced by white supremacist power structures.

Works Cited


