Grafting and Other Ramifications: Improvisation Across American Studies and Dance

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At the 2012 Women Who Rock UnConference in Seattle, hip hop artist Monae Smith, a.k.a Medusa, “the lyrical seducer out of L.A.,” defined her criterion for collaboration as a shared, but not identical, vision. *Can you see your vision in my vision? Can I see my vision in your vision?* If this is lacking, warned Medusa, artists may still choose to work together in supporting one another’s projects, but they should be honest with one another and know at the outset that this kind of work—however productive—is not collaboration.¹ Collaboration is a multi-directional mutual improvisation on a dreamscape of shared possibility.

Team-teaching across disciplinary branches within the liberal arts is a practice that could benefit from Medusa’s insights. It is one thing to divide up tasks, respect each other’s approaches, and take turns teaching. This can be highly productive for instructors and students, but it isn’t necessarily collaborative. When instructors in different disciplines begin from a shared dreamscape of reciprocal vision, new possibilities open up for improvising in collaborative classrooms.

Our shared dreamscape emerged from conversations about improvisation from different disciplines that resonated across the same values: inclusivity, shared authority, and flexible definitions of virtuosity. We experienced different kinds of interdisciplinary training in our respective fields: Sherrie Tucker in a critical theory program where she studied jazz as an unguaranteed site for group identity with room for difference, and Michelle Heffner Hayes in a critical dance studies program where she focused on historiography, postcolonial feminism and national identity. We realized that we had some of the same assigned readings for our individual courses and “nerded out” on artist scholars like Pauline Oliveros, Susan Foster, George Lewis, Miya Masaoka, and Sun Ra, among others. We were interested in a more effective and inclusive way to teach improvisation in our respective departments, which involved connecting the theoretical lenses that we wished to share in this exchange to the robust practice we cultivated in the classroom. Seeking an appropriate metaphor of cultivation for this new approach to teaching, we were inspired by the use of the term “grafting” in in the large-scale multidisciplinary exhibit of the Spencer Museum of Art and the Natural History Museum/Biodiversity Research Center, entitled *Trees and Other Ramifications: Branches in Nature and Culture*. After we participated in this exhibit, we were inspired to apply the metaphor of “grafting” for approaches to improvisation that produce a hybridized pedagogy.

In incorporating critical improvisation studies readings in her graduate seminars in the Department of American Studies, Tucker felt challenged in her attempts to get students to connect with their bodies and to write as improvisers, not merely as cultural critics observing those who improvise. How could she get theory-focused grad students in a reading seminar to consider research, thinking, and writing as embodied practices? Meanwhile, in the Department of Theater and Dance, Hayes struggled to persuade undergraduate dance students to recognize their own intelligence and to engage deeply in the intellectual exercises embedded in the studio practice. We decided that the same readings and exercises would benefit both classes, despite the differences in disciplinary backgrounds and educational levels. We had two different groups of students orientated toward performing particular feats, displays of prowess, and their labors revealed unanticipated outcomes. In addition to challenging and expanding the intellectual understanding of complex theoretical structures, accumulating a new vocabulary of
embodied responses with their distinct measures of virtuosity, and integrating different compositional improvisation strategies within performance, the group generated knowledge and notions of community across intersectional identities. We did not operate in a vacuum, however, as this was a time of critical and creative re-workings of identity, identification, community, difference, and performance occurring across critical theory in black queer theory, queer of color theory, Crip theory and disability studies, critical improvisation studies, and other interdisciplinary formations. Of new rhizomatic directions in queer Black studies of this time, Jafari S. Allen notes "the ways scholars and artists have engaged the question of “roots” and routes—not necessarily apropos of moving place but of reckoning ancestry (in terms of claiming and recalling early same-gender-loving artists and writers) and shifting, combining, and rethinking aesthetic, intellectual, and political traditions" (Allen 29). How could we set into motion a learning experience that built on our own questions of “‘roots’ and routes,” and that invited our students to join us in improvisational grafting of American studies and dance?

The prompt to “graft” derived from the theme of the Trees exhibit, yet many of the models we drew from and have encountered since tend to draw from the rhizomatic alternative promoted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Nevertheless, the more that we worked with the concept of “grafting,” the more we came to see it as our botanical metaphor of choice for cultivating the connections between our two courses. Unlike Deleuze and Guatarri, we had not “tired of trees”—at least, not entirely (Kuppers 222). Spurning the theoretical ramifications of trees, these philosophers turned to the rhizome—the proliferation of winding stems below the surface that produce plants without central root systems—in order to offer ways of thinking about connectivity without hierarchy or teleology. We appreciate the value of this model, for example in Allen’s use of “Black queer rhizomatics” for teaching Black studies, mentioned earlier (Allen 28), as well as Petra Kuppers’ “rhizomatic model of disability” through an assemblage of “poetry, performance, and touch,” as a way of thinking that can “hold a wide variety of experiences and structured positions in moments of precarious productive imbalance.” (Kuppers 223). Yet, when it came to collaborating on how to cultivate generative connections between our two courses, the concept of grafting beckoned. Grafting is not just about planting two intractably rooted trees in the same grove for fifteen weeks and calling it a day; it is about identifying opportunities for fruitful grafts, then carefully cutting and holding together the pieces in order to cultivate new growth. Enough connective tissue must exist for grafts to take hold and grow, and enough difference to generate new possibilities. What theories and practices would emerge from “shifting, combining, and rethinking” across shared questions and different expectations? And how could we build this generative potential into our course?

As we composed our separate syllabi and planned opportunities for interconnections, we wanted to build from roots that nurtured our pedagogical theory and praxis, while carefully planning where to cut and hold the branches in hopes of generating hybrid growth. If we may be so bold as to compare, for a moment, syllabus design with artistic composition, we could turn to Anthony Braxton’s use of “conceptual grafting,” as “means to avoid serialism,” (Braxton in Lock, 167) a compositional method for starting at “different points and then try[ing] to generate from those points” (Lock, 51). Following Fred Moten, we consider Braxton’s “conceptual grafting” as a mode of “structural planning” for improvisational multiplicity, albeit in a pedagogical register (Moten, 133). The separations between our classes, in other words, were as much a part of the collaborative improvisational pedagogy as were the designated grafts.

In 2008, American studies professor Tucker and dance professor Hayes began a series of concurrent course offerings at the University of Kansas. These collaborations brought together graduate students who had signed up for an American studies seminar on theories of improvisation, embodiment, and difference with undergraduate students enrolled in a studio
class in dance improvisation. Because the professors’ shared pedagogical dreamscape did not fit neatly within established criterion for team-teaching, they created these opportunities informally. The two very different groups of students met together and separately, shared readings and studio exercises, and engaged in reflection and documentation of improvisation in different contexts. Students explored improvisation across five modules:

1. as a pedagogical tool for the cultivation of mindful, collaborative ways of learning;
2. as a practice of rapid, embodied problem-solving;
3. as a theoretical model for history, writing and memory;
4. as a display of virtuosity within a tradition (choreography, archival research, etc.);
5. as a means of promoting social justice and building community across cultural and artistic boundaries.

In this collaboratively authored article, Tucker and Hayes reflect on the surprising ramifications of that first grafted class in 2008, and subsequent collaborations, in order to posit a model of improvisational pedagogy of grafting across disciplines that may invigorate research and praxis across disciplines in the liberal arts.

Grafting Critical Theory and Practice as Research: A Productive Pedagogy

The decision to combine our courses emerged in a series of conversations about our respective research areas. Tucker shares interests in improvisation and identity, community formation, gender, race, sexuality, and dis/ability with Hayes, whose work on flamenco and improvised dance addresses race, gender, sexuality, and (trans)nationality. Both of us were committed to teaching to and from our passions, even when teaching courses that fulfilled basic requirements for the degrees in our different departments. Hayes asked, for example: how does the first course in a dance composition series designed to train contemporary choreographers also impart knowledge about history and the cultural construction of bodies? Similarly, Tucker asked: how could a graduate research methods course or theory seminar benefit from attention to embodied improvisational practices? What does the study of improvisation offer to our research methodologies and pedagogical practices? One of the most palpable effects on ourselves and our students was a heightened awareness of contingency, embodied knowledge, and moment-to-moment decision-making. Students from dance and American studies were able to recognize and analyze the process of knowledge creation in our practices. What may have been perceived as “tricks” thrown off in a moment of arbitrary action were recontextualized as informed decisions, shaping and shaped by readings and discussions, inside jokes, and popular culture. Both groups realized the potential for creative navigation within and against the institutional and traditional parameters that discipline us in our respective programmatic routines. Such revelations punctuated the reflection papers submitted by students across the courses. In that spirit, we “graft” our own embodied reflections on our pedagogy at various points in this article.


On August 25, 2008, four graduate students attended my new seminar, AMS 998: “Interdisciplinary Studies of Music as Culture.” Two were working on jazz studies dissertations in American studies; the other two (from communication studies, and film and media studies, respectively) also planned to incorporate music into their graduate work. My goal was to explore
creative interdisciplinary approaches to writing about music that moved beyond the type of academic writing in which disembodied critical thinkers unpack the meaning of artistic performance and/or audience reception. I wanted to help the students to drop into their researcher-writer bodies and notice the phenomenology of their moment-to-moment decision-making—in the library, at the computer, and in the spaces where they encounter the music they want to dissertate about. In order to facilitate this discovery, I set up a series of assignments called “Auto(body)ethnographies,” which included instructions like those given for “Auto(body)ethnography #3: My Writing Body,” which read:

Please write about your writing body. As with the earlier assignments, please link the texts with your body research. What about your writing body makes it to the page? In what way is or isn't improvisation part of your writing practice? What preparation is required of your body, of the space in which you write, of the conditions under which you write the best? How do you manage awareness, memory, productivity, whatever else are the requirements of your practice? What does it feel like to know what to write, what kind of world do you inhabit then, and how does your writing body shape that world?

But I didn’t spring that on them yet. We would work up to it. The students who joined me at the seminar table that first day knew that they would be reading such works as Jacques Attali’s classic Noise: the Political Economy of Music (1985), George Lewis’s A Power Stronger than Itself: the AACM and American Experimentalism (2008), and Martha Mockus’s Sounding Out: Pauline Oliveros and Lesbian Musicality (2007). They also may have noticed that they were reading Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere’s Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Studies Reader (2003). But they were truly in for a shock when I mentioned that they would be required to dance.

“Next week, instead of the seminar room, meet me in Robinson Gym.” I didn’t know what would happen next. Enrollment was already too low; I had begged to go forward with four students. If anyone dropped, this experiment would end. “This is improvisation,” I told them: “I don’t know what will happen. But I will dance with you, and I would like very much to have you all take this risk with me, improvising a relationship between AMS 998 and DANC 150.” I made bold promises: dancing would transform how we write, how we read, how we research, and how we listen. I then handed out their first writing assignment: “Auto(body)ethnography 1: My Body in the Dance Studio. (Please write your observations about your body, including your brain, as you move with your classmates in Dance 150. Please link the readings with your body research).” The next week, we would improvise with undergraduate dance majors and a dance professor, I explained. The following week, we would share our observations of our bodies in motion.

The first seminar meeting is always daunting. To broach dance as an object of study already instills panic in many cultural studies scholars. To raise the verb, dance, not to mention the imperative: “Dance!” heightens awareness of bodily participation that students outside of dance are disciplined to ignore. Gathering around our seminar table, we routinely face new configurations of others with whom we enter three-month relationships of critical dialogue, performance, and vulnerability. We work to master the betrayals of our bodies—the shaky voice, the flush, the brain fog. We strive to overcome (or at least obscure) the symptoms of whatever insecurities arise in encounters with our scholarly selves and others. Remembering that moment of asking the students to dance, I drop into my body again, feeling excited, uncomfortable. I feared, not that they would flee the room, but, worse, send polite, professional emails explaining why they had opted for another seminar closer to their comps fields. Dance was a powerful word. All of the brainy self-introductions that we had just executed—terrifying enough to perform—gave way as we plummeted to new depths of scholarly vulnerability. I urged these
students to prepare for our classes by noticing their bodies when powering up computers, facing the page, or entering an archive and deciding which boxes to request (only to stumble upon an unexpected file and request something else). Our improvising bodies have more to do with our work as scholars than we are trained to acknowledge; this is what I wanted to explore.

Risk: I am not trained in how to help students do this. But I desperately wanted to, and my membership in the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) Research Initiative, which began in 2007, gave me courage to admit that I needed to learn more about improvisational practice in order to do my work, despite my disciplinary, institutional, and even architectural separation from the performing arts. I saw in Hayes’s DANC 150 class the embodied thinking and thinking embodiment that I needed that could not be supplemented in reading and discussion alone: students would move as well as read and practice a sequence of exercises that built skills through parameters and prompts. We could move back and forth between theory and practice until we understood the hierarchical power structure implicit in that Cartesian split between critical theory and dance practice. I was ecstatic when Hayes invited us in, and utterly floored when all four grad students joined me the following week. I'm sure they could feel that I, too, was terrified to move among dancers. Hayes’s teaching methods guided us into realms of possibility in which we, too, could experience surprising spaces within narrow parameters (“You can enter. You can exit.”).

Her suggestions for finding new—rather than “dancerly”—movement sometimes worked to my students’ advantage (sometimes shockingly so), as they contributed physical ideas that were very different from those of the trained dancers. Post-exercise discussions were fascinating, as the two groups of students talked across their mutual intimidations and admirations about what just happened and what they took from it. For my students, this often took the form of Dance students’ abilities to discuss our shared readings through relating them to improvisational decision-making and discovery in practice. My students envied these insights and recognized the theoretical benefits of breaking through entrenched routines of textual and representational analysis. Some dreaded disconnecting from their bodies and creative pursuits when they entered graduate school.

The first set of “auto(body)ethnographies” contributed by my students manifested as confessions of somatic shame, but also revealed threads of fascination about embodiment, shifting directionality, and the implications for research. The AMS 998 students were well prepared to theorize social location, power, identity, gender, race, and sexuality, but found it almost unbearable to inhabit their bodies in the studio. For one student, it was the horror of exposing their toes in public; for another, it was feeling stymied by how to move across the floor. As the semester progressed, I noticed the graduate students increasingly incorporating Hayes’s teaching not only in their written reflections of the dance class, but also into their engagement with the readings and interrogations of embodied effects of performing intelligence in graduate seminars. They began to quote the insights articulated by the dance students in their papers (“They are so brilliant at connecting the readings with their body research”) and even began to work their own embodied memories of the studio classes into discussions of the readings. It felt risky and uncomfortable because it was—it meant questioning the cultural capital of a life of the mind estranged from a thinking body.
One might assume that dancers are comfortable improvising, but most dance students have limited experience—if any—of improvisation prior to taking courses at a university. As a general rule, dance students are most comfortable when they have specific choreography to master and interpret, preferably something that will showcase their skills. Imagine a decade of scrutiny before the mirror’s reflection of a body always conceived in terms of its failure to achieve what is (for most people) an impossible ideal. Then, take away the postures and gestures used to mask that failure. My hope was that, through collaboration with the graduate students, dance students would learn to recognize the hierarchy of traditional dance training and its racialized, gendered, classed, ableist, and heteronormative effects.

Further, I hoped that they would recognize their own authority or agency, and the intelligence of the information specific to individual bodies. This transformation requires a deconstruction of what has been valued and de-valued, erased, and excluded in their previous training. As dance theorist Susan Foster described in her account of the improvisational dances of Richard Bull: “Instead of measuring their competence against a standardized vocabulary, it embraced their diverse talents and invited them to contribute significantly to the creation of the piece” (Foster 24). The process commands that participants surrender the notion of idealized beauty and recognize different definitions of virtuosity. Through reflection exercises and movement journals, students from both groups confessed their anxiety about being seen and judged in the unfamiliar context of improvisation. Recognizing discomfort is part of teaching improvisation. Risk is an essential component of live performance, whether it is on a stage or in a discussion among colleagues. The temporary vulnerability of the risk in improvisation requires the construction of a “safe space.” The creation of that space yields an awareness of the risk “other” bodies experience in everyday life. In our combined studio courses, we developed a mantra for moments of discomfort: “Recognize it, honour it, and move on.”

**Mindful, Collaborative Ways of Learning**

Initially, we set out to design a “mindfully embodied” methodology that would allow graduate students (with substantial theoretical preparation but little dance experience) and trained undergraduate dancers (unfamiliar with interdisciplinary scholarship) to contribute to a shared classroom environment. We compared syllabi from previous courses and plotted our goals for
the semester. We chose resonant themes and readings, and also recognized that the expectations of graduate and undergraduate students differ, so we arranged for seven weeks of concurrent sessions across the five modules of exploration. In separate sessions, graduate students read and discussed books and articles on possibilities and limitations of improvising communities such as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and Pauline Oliveros's Sonic Meditation groups for creating more inclusive, equitable, and democratic praxis. Feeling at home around the seminar table, these students wrestled with theories underpinning these studies and practiced applying these to their own research projects. Undergraduate dance students delved into the athletic aspects of weight sharing to produce lifts, animated simple movement phrases with strategies like exaggeration, repetition, inversion and displacement. They developed the stamina and focus to improvise for longer periods of time within increasingly complex parameters.

One interesting “graft” emerged in the shared sessions that first semester. Students and faculty in dance and American studies continually drew connections between the level of surveillance experienced by students in the studio and the formation of subjectivity with respect to the normative discourses of culture in any given context. It quickly became clear that this cultivation of awareness creates a low, resting level of fear that manifests in a reluctance to move. That stillness or hesitation indicates an initial discomfort and the need for processing time. We felt compelled to recognize these responses and build them into our practice. Borrowing from traditions in the liberal arts and Sciences (like cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology), we encouraged students to play the simultaneous roles of participant and observer. To allay anxieties, anyone could choose to remain silent or still during our work. We began with simple parameters and allowed for extended processing time. Following each exercise, we would ask “What did you notice?” Students became accustomed to a rapid feedback loop that incorporated a translation of movement experiences to verbal communication. Then, we returned to the movement exploration, synthesizing the critical dialogue into the exercise with new parameters.

The progression of studio activities developed from extremely limited structures to more complex “improvisation scores,” with shorter intervals of processing time. Students explored mirroring and following in pairs, then progressed to “flocking” (a group following a leader, shifting leadership by changing facings in the room). Once students had some experience applying these skills, we experimented with entering the space, exiting the space, and with moments of stillness. We then added layers, such as exploring negative space, changes of level, and contact between bodies from touch to sharing weight. Stillness remained a core value, but the quality of the stillness changed from a paralysis induced by fear to a deliberate choice to rest and wait for the right opportunity.

The 2008 course pairing allowed us to develop a model for a pedagogical praxis. We learned that, before embodied learning can take place, we needed to establish a level of trust as a group. In order to establish that trust, we began by considering issues that resonated deeply with the group, including discussions about personal identity, community formation, and the developing awareness of how bodies interact as individuals and in groups. We discussed how our practice revealed unwritten cultural codes for movement and space, from regional or gendered perceptions of proximity to the sexualized perceptions of touch and partnering. In one illuminating moment, an American studies student elicited gasps from the dance students because he walked across the floor wearing shoes and carrying a cup of coffee. The moment was scandalous because street shoes and any beverage (apart from water) are prohibited in dance studios. The transgression of a rule that seems arbitrary to an “outsider” revealed the ways in which cultural codes become naturalized through repetition. Curiously, it also blurred the boundaries between the two groups of students, forming a new community.
Grafting Practice to a Theory of History, Writing, and Memory

One of the modules that we used in the 2008 and 2012 iterations of our grafted classes was the re-enactment of a dance and writing improvisation called “Detour” that Hayes performed with Susan Rose and Dancers in 1995. At different moments in the course, the “scion” of the metaphor was the movement grafted on the “rootstock” of the critical theory, but in this particular case, the movement parameters were the “rootstock.” The choreography reveals the process by which narratives are written, especially the fact that what is captured in a narrative depends upon the perspective of the author, the fragility and impermanence of source materials, and how much information is excluded in the written account. In Hayes’s article about the work: “The Writing on the Wall: Reading Improvisation in Flamenco and Postmodern Dance,” (2003) she deconstructs the unwritten codes that govern improvisational performance in different cultural contexts. In this case, the different contexts were the academic realms of American studies and dance studies. Hayes theorizes that the ephemerality of performance reveals the rapid, embodied decision-making present in recalling the “original” event after the fact, and how researchers make improvisational decisions in writing. Also, the “trace” of the performance (its writing, the memory of its participants) represents, but never fully reproduces all the detail of the (always vanishing) “original.” The juxtaposition of the plenitude of the performance to the paucity of its written account suggests that “other” histories (oral histories, marginalized experiences) are not “inferior,” and that the privileging of the written account belies its unstable nature as a “legitimate” record.

The ideas from the original choreography for “Detour” are applied in the classroom through a series of improvisations with dancers, writers, chalk and a chalkboard. As one dancer moves across the chalkboard, the writer tries to capture their movements through scrawls on the surface of that chalkboard. The “trace” that remains is a map of the decisions of the dancer and the writer in that moment, suggestive and yet inadequate, because it cannot fully reproduce the event. The exercise becomes more complex when another dancer enters the space and tries to “read” the “evidence” and reconstruct the “original” event, and another writer chalks the new event. After a series of iterations, the blackboard is covered in scrawls, and both dancers and writers are marked with smears of chalk, now not only writing and dancing, but also written upon. The movement always refers back to the “original,” which is both a further formulation of that event and a new performance.

Tucker Reflection: Tracing “Trees and Other Ramifications”

The highlight of the shared class meetings was a two-week long structured improvisation in Marvin Grove, a large wooded space behind the Spencer Museum of Art on the University of Kansas campus. The improvisational events were part of the campus-wide initiative Trees and Other Ramifications: Branches in Nature and Culture. Hayes’s students would adapt the improvisation scores from the studio to an entirely different spatial, textural, and sonic environment of grassy hills, trees, pathways, railings, fall leaves, shadows, birds, squirrels, and routine (yet-always-startling) carillon chimes on the quarter hour. Tucker’s students would adapt what they had learned from the studio, and from their interdisciplinary readings on music and dance, to improvise new approaches to scholarly writing about performance. How would improvising, embodied graduate students represent and theorize improvisational performance of people with whom they had been dancing and sharing ideas? How would they mark the distance between the dance and the trace? And how would graduate students who had shared weight in the dance studio, but were nonetheless accustomed to writing alone (each striving to produce the requisite original contribution to the field) manage to work collaboratively on a culminating assignment? Their discussions for how to approach the assignment revolved
around issues of ethics, of representation, and their discomfort with being separated from those they were analyzing. The insights gained from Hayes’s “Writing on the Wall” article and “trace” activity had productively oriented the graduate students to recognize the ephemerality of performance and to appreciate, rather than feel thwarted by, the failure of writing to capture the “original.” The approaches they took included: juxtaposing multiple perspectives, producing performance photographs that included the documentarians in the frame; interviewing dancers about their analyses of improvising in the grove; and sound-collections of bird calls, chimes, delivery trucks, and wind. All of these distinct components were then rolled into an interactive Wiki to share with the students in DANC 150. While my approval mattered—I would, after all, grade the assignment, and two students were my advisees—the primary audience was clearly the DANC 150 students, for whom the AMS 998 students had developed a deep sense of care and respect. Incorporating insights gained from reading such works as Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, AMS students considered the orientating effects on researchers in facing others as objects of research, and considered the difference it made to twist, or queer, in relation to the pull of that straight line (Ahmed 15-16). One graduate student began a piece of writing with an Ahmed-inspired observation of his movement and embodied perspective while observing the dance students: “I move to the front of the group of dancers who are still warming up to look at their facial expressions.” He then gave way to the straight line that he inherited as a white, cis-male, graduate student documentarian; descriptive details tumbled forth: “The dancers are wearing a variety of clothing: tight pants, shorts, sweatpants, sweatshirts, long or short sleeve t shirts, and all different colors.” Suddenly, he interrupted this orientating impulse—twisting once again to inhabit his body and reflect on the embodied perspectives of those whose actions he traced, and on what he could not know by facing others. “I wonder: do the dancers feel comfortable, nervous with us watching them and recording what they're doing?”

![Participants and observers performing in Marvin Grove, 2008. Courtesy of Sherrie Tucker.](image-url)
Hayes Reflections: Improvisers in the Wild....

Improvising in Marvin Grove made it palpable that the university is both a community in dialogue with itself and the many branches of its disciplines, as well as an institution embedded in larger communities. We convened in this terrain to explore some basic improvisation scores, like taking shapes from the landscape, imitating the movements of other people, and following the “enter, exit, stillness” prompt. We chose different groups to move, to watch, and to record the action through recorded interviews, video and written journals. Groups of dancers and documenters alternated roles, shattering our notion of two separate groups of dancers or theoreticians. The exercise echoed our studio-based reflections on the roles of participant and observer in traditions like cultural anthropology, sociology, and psychology, including how our collaboration hybridized those roles. The scale of the space changed the context from the studio to a vast public site with history, topography, pedestrians and wildlife.

The first iterations of the improvisers sent them to far points of the grove, so it was difficult to even locate them, producing a hilarious scene that became a theme of people struggling with video cameras running up and down hills to capture the action. One of the graduate students, Pete Williams, notes “Rich runs right up the hill with video camera in hand, which then [made me] immediately think of that scene in the Big Lebowski when Walter jumps out of the Dude’s car and screams ‘lets take that hill,’ like he was back in ‘Nam or something. Anyway, Rich and the other dancers took that hill with gusto.” (“Observation/Study”). In this moment of role slippage, Rich, a graduate student in the role of “documenting,” was also considered one of the dancers. Their decisions featured still postures borrowed from trees, tree climbing, (illegal) sculpture climbing, following pedestrians (often frightening them), rolling down the grassy hills, and kicking through piles of leaves. In observing and recording these activities (particularly the discomfort of the pedestrians being followed by a herd of improvisers), students on the sidelines discussed structural changes, and the decisions they would make when they had a chance to move. As described in the ethnographic observations of one graduate student:

They are trying to identify who is doing what, even though from this distance it’s somewhat hard to tell. They seem to be pointing out classmates who are doing something that they like or find interesting (“Observation/Study”).

Through our rapid feedback discussions between the performers and the observers, we discovered that some constraints would be advisable, like “observe the signs/no climbing on sculptures,” “don’t menace the pedestrians/engage respectfully,” and “isolate your activity to a specific area of the park.” Once we contained the activity, we were better able to act, observe and reflect across our increasingly intertwined disciplinary practices. Critical thinking and creative problem-solving had become easily accessible tools for the dance students in dialogue with the graduate students. As a group, we chose to narrow the “improvisation scores” to specific activities, like sharing weight and traveling around specific trees, entering and exiting from tree to tree, and taking on the movements of trees, squirrels or pedestrians (at a respectful distance). Eventually, people from outside the courses gathered to observe the activities, and some pedestrians elected to engage with the improvisers. For me, this integration of creative and research activity in the campus culture underscored the notion that our work is not isolated within our academic silos. As I listen to the sound recordings from the Wiki, I hear myself talking about improvisation, especially touch and sharing weight: “contact work... teaches you something about your accountability to other people and the environment” (“Observation/Study”). This observation reflects upon the positioning of the event, but also the theoretical implications of doing the work of Cultural Studies. Research touches communities,
contributes to the representation of cultures, and has a material effect in the lived experiences of its “subjects.”


Virtuosity in Dance and Critical Theory...

Although we were able to explore complex parameters for the design of improvisation scores in the concurrent groups, the movement choices were necessarily more pedestrian to account for the limited class time and the mixed abilities of the groups. Dance students were eager to pursue the capacity for athleticism in these activities in our separate class meetings. Since DANC 150 is part of a four-semester composition series, Hayes decided to create a choreographic work based on the ideas developed during the 2008 collaborative semester. Other Ramifications, for thirteen members of the University Dance Company, employed the improvisational structures as an opportunity to display virtuosity within a tradition of studio training and mine the possibilities for movement invention gleaned from the collaboration. The structures and experiences from the “grafted” courses shaped the choreography, from the “original” movement phrases to the strategies gleaned from the reflections on the readings. It was performed as part of the University of Kansas spring concert on April 16-17, 2009.

Set to music by Gustavo Santaolalla and Radiohead, the first section of the piece incorporated a structured improvisation based on observations of people standing in lines at the grocery store, the DMV, or other public settings. Students carried over postures and the codes for appropriate spatial distance from these contexts. Then, they created a game structure that broke these codes, submitting to contact, picking up each other’s gestures, and initiating each other’s movements. They leaned on each other, shoved the entire line forward in a domino effect, “butted in line,” and dragged people to the back of the line as the queue moved slowly forward. Rather than acting as if they were jockeying for position to achieve a personal goal, the performers used improvisational structures from class to contradict the purpose generally associated with waiting in a line. Instead, temporary alliances formed and dissolved, and the group wordlessly negotiated the gleeful disruption of the individual isolation coerced by the competition of the line. The decision to work playfully in the line and to envision the group as a community evolved from the collaborative process of working with the graduate students, and
also the consideration of representation onstage as a form of writing alternate histories. Tucker sat in the audience with the graduate students—breathing together, smiling—and afterwards reflected together about “getting it” and feeling sympathetic muscle twitches during the performance.

Other Ramifications, Part 1, University Dance Company, video still, 2009. Courtesy of the Department of Theatre & Dance at the University of Kansas.

The second section of Other Ramifications employed improvisation as a means of generating new vocabulary during the choreographic process using exercises from the course. In a three-month rehearsal process for four hours a week, we “set” the results of “call and response” duets, trading and building vocabulary in a conversational style; partnering with shared weight to harness momentum in lifts and falls; and picking up movements from following and flocking exercises. The choreography of what results from repetitive practice reveals higher-level skills in terms of the negotiation of the moment, increased physical risk, and the body’s capacity to trace moments of meaning through retrospective design.

Other Ramifications, Part 2, University Dance Company, video still, 2009. Courtesy of the Department of Theatre & Dance at the University of Kansas.

Improvisation as a Means of Promoting Social Justice and Building Community
The next iteration of the combined courses in 2012 carried over the lessons of the five modules: collaboration, problem-solving, embodying theoretical models, exploring virtuosity from different perspectives, and building intersectional communities. Most powerfully, though, the social justice component was informed by disability studies. Joining Hayes’s DANC 150 students this time around were four graduate students who signed up for Tucker’s seminar, this time entitled “Improvisation, Bodies, and Difference.” Although graduate students writing about music in the liberal arts were even less plentiful than they were in 2008, Tucker knew of a number of social justice-minded grad students in American studies and women, gender, and sexuality studies seeking a seminar in theories of bodies and power. Her recruitment flyer highlighted grafts of “improvisation” to these keywords, an easy task given the burgeoning field of social justice-centered works in critical improvisation studies and improvisational skills advocated by activists and theorists of social justice, such as Angela Davis, who wrote: “What we manage to do each time we win a victory is not so much to secure change once and for all, but rather to create new terrains for struggle.” (Abolition Democracy, 21). In the flyer for her class, Tucker advertised improvisation studies as “an emerging interdisciplinary field that draws from insights and practices of creative artists to explore contingency, corporeality, identity- and community-formation unhinged from sameness.” The flyer’s text goes on to identify fields impacted by improvisation studies, including gender studies, sports studies, urban planning, law, pedagogy, philosophy, community studies, and activism. Seminar shoppers were directed to peruse the journal Critical Studies of Improvisation for more information.

Less inclined towards experimental art worlds than the 2008 cohort, the interests of the AMS 998 students of 2012 in intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality, queer theory, and transgender theory primed them for our new module. These students were more prepared to directly address the goal of community-building and promoting social justice. Hayes and Tucker had just received a grant, along with colleagues in Theatre and Music (Nicole Hodges Persley and Kip Haaheim) and composer, improviser, musician, and humanitarian Pauline Oliveros to bring trainers from Oliveros’ Deep Listening Institute to conduct community workshops using an instrument that adapts to literally every body to enable all-ability improvisation. We decided to involve our classes in the mixed-ability community workshops on the Adaptive Use Musical Instrument (AUMI) and to find creative ways to continue using the AUMI in our class sessions that followed.

Developed by Oliveros and a team of artists, therapists, technologists, engineers, programmers, and students, AUMI is a downloadable software interface that transforms any laptop or tablet with a plug-in or built-in camera into a flexible musical instrument. Sounds are activated not by fingering a keyboard or clicking a mouse, but by body movement, picked up by the camera. Originally designed for people with a narrow range of movement, AUMI has been enjoyed by people of all abilities, including dancers interested in movement-generated sound. Its hundreds of sound choices may be triggered by a slight wag of a finger, small tilt of a nose, or eyeglasses of someone executing a broad side-to-side lunge. It has even been able to track breathing from the rise and fall of an individual’s chest (Oliveros, “A musical improvisation interface”; Tucker, “Stretched Boundaries”).

Tucker became involved in AUMI research in 2009 through her participation in the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) research initiative. Fellow ICASP member Oliveros offered AUMI as a possible research project for the “Improvisation, Gender, and the Body” research area. The team traveled to Poughkeepsie, New York, where Oliveros introduced them to Leaf Miller, an occupational therapist who used AUMI in her inclusive drummer circles at a school for children and young adults with disabilities. Most impressive to Tucker was the capacity of the instrument to reconfigure social relations among students,
teachers, caregivers and parents, staff, and therapists at the school. How could AUMI extend our branch-to-branch improvisational grafting at University of Kansas?

The integration of AUMI into our collaboration linked movement and sound improvisation and expanded the community of improvisers beyond students enrolled in the courses. During the fall of 2012, we collaborated with AbleHawks & Allies, a KU student group dedicated to promoting awareness about disability, and Independence, Inc., a community-based non-profit organization dedicated to “to maximize[ing] the independence of people with disabilities through advocacy, peer support, training, transportation and community education.” (“About Us”) The first meeting of all the groups occurred in two, 2-hour workshops held at Independence, Inc. and on the KU campus (September 28-29, 2012), in which trainers from the Deep Listening Institute taught participants how to set up and play the AUMI in the context of a “jam session.”


Hayes Reflections: Negotiating Scale and Distance

For many of the dance students, these AUMI workshops marked the first time that they had been in close contact with people with disabilities. We assigned readings about dance and disability to set a context and distributed an etiquette guide provided by AbleHawks and Allies, but it was clear that a new level of discomfort emerged with the addition of new abilities to the cohort. Readings from disability studies further challenged the “idealized body” normativized in dance training, and the obstacles (cultural and, often, architectural) that exclude people with disabilities. In addition to the “new normal” of negotiating improvisation among strangers, students hesitated to cross new boundaries, with questions like: “How do I speak with someone who is visually impaired? Is it appropriate to offer help to a person in a wheelchair when her path is obstructed? Should I change my level to make eye contact?” This fear of causing offense led to the familiar hesitance to move and the silence of processing time. Additionally, the sensitivity of AUMI to small movements and the limited spatial range of the interactive screens required a different scale of action, exactly the opposite of the full-body gestures and shapes entrenched in dance training. The constraints of AUMI created an initial humility as dancers observed people with less mobility exercise skill in manipulating an instrument that challenged the supposedly “able-bodied” dancers. First, the dancers recognized the fear of “doing the wrong thing” as they interacted with people with disabilities. Then, they surrendered
their years of training in movements that showcase their strengths. Through practice, they recognized a new level of mastery and new set of skills.

In an AUMI jam session, one must listen across embodied difference and move in response to that information to participate. Each decision has an effect on the group as a whole. Reading and learning alongside the graduate students, dance students reconceived how we define groups and their divisions, and how we communicate across obstacles to establish a common ground for that moment, but the boundaries of community must continually be “stretched” (Tucker, “Stretched Boundaries”). What became clear to us was a desire for sustained interaction between groups previously isolated through their affinities and abilities, and to develop a project that explored the movement and musical possibilities across the groups with the AUMI: responding to cues, trading roles, and examining the social justice implications of improvising across abilities.

**Tucker Reflections: “Sending and Receiving” in the Seminar**

The “Improvisation, Bodies, Difference” seminar-participants were actively involved in the community AUMI workshops and studio sessions. As before, the graduate students began the seminar with trepidation about dancing with undergraduate dance majors, but soon became fascinated by what they learned about embodiment and improvisation, both from discussing readings with the dance majors and improvising with them in the studio and in the grove. Instead of a Wiki initiated by AMS 998 students responding to improvised movements of DANC 150 students (who were later invited to add comments), both groups of students documented, wrote, improvised, analyzed, and commented on a closed Facebook site.

The students’ enthusiasm for AUMI inspired me to tackle a set of constraints of the graduate seminar format that have bothered me for some time. The seminar experiences that I recall from my own graduate student experience were thrilling, but also incredibly stressful. I barely spoke as a graduate student. I recognize that pressure in my students. Although it manifests in different ways in different people, the graduate students I encounter tend to be extremely self-conscious, anxious about the burden of performing intelligence whenever they speak or write. The result is an emphasis on output (Am I smart enough?) which manifests in a behavioral division between participants who cannot stop talking (in hopes of hitting the right note at some point in the solo?) those who internally berate themselves for not finding the courage to speak; those who cannot write anything under 60 pages, and; those who freeze at the computer and cannot type a word. How could AUMI help graduate students shift the focus from sounding to listening—to attune them to the state that Oliveros has called “Sending and Receiving”?

One day, before opening the discussion, I asked the seminar participants to open AUMI on their laptops. I read to them the “Sending and Receiving” meditation: “With each breath I send sound and receive sound” (Oliveros, 13). We repeated the meditation together. I then asked them to play AUMI in the mode of sending and receiving. We were all to send and receive AUMI’s sounds as we improvised together. The students listened attentively and responded thoughtfully, allowing for space between utterances. I then said, “now, let’s discuss the reading for today in the same sending and receiving way that we just did with the AUMI.” The result was analogous to Hayes’s observations of her students’ new appreciation for small movements and gestures. Patterns shifted; insights and questions were delivered in pared down, thoughtful pieces that built on one another, with more reflection space between utterances. I noticed students making more eye contact with one another. I found myself speaking less as I listened to the interaction among the students. I have continued to use AUMI in seminar discussions many times since, even when the course topic is not explicitly about improvisation.
Conclusion, but Not the End

As we reflect on the results of our branch-to-branch improvisations across disciplines, the university, and broader communities over the past ten years, we are struck by the impact of the liberal arts as a particularly capacious greenhouse for surprising and productive grafts. The collaborations spanning the years have generated research, performance, and community engagement, and have included students and faculty from American studies, dance, film and media studies, music, music therapy, theatre, communications studies, anthropology, computer science, and women, gender and sexuality studies. The Marvin Grove improvisations were incorporated into a collaborative exhibit. The AUMI project brought our classes into partnership with the Deep Listening Institute, Able Hawks & Allies, and Independence, Inc. With the formation of AUMI-KU InterArts, the group became part of the AUMI Consortium, joining international research teams within the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSCI) and Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP). In turn, the networks and sustained collaboration of AUMI-KU InterArts have facilitated, and continue to facilitate, new and ever-stretching improvisations for our students across the liberal arts. In our ongoing collaborations, what we have found reflects Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman’s observation detailed in their edited collection Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivities: “material bodies, engaged in improvisatory practices can effect a reorientation of identity and community” (Siddall and Waterman 12). This has certainly been the case in our ongoing collaborations.

In 2013, Hayes and Tucker, along with their KU collaborators Hodges Persley and Haasheim, the AbleHawks and Allies campus organization, and community partners at Independence Inc., met to begin planning for a mixed-ability, multi-media, cross-community devised improvisational performance, Four Rehearsals and a Performance: No Experience Necessary, directed by Hodges Persley. The performance on October 30, 2013 yielded many exciting ramifications. AbleHawks and Allies, whose organizational time is occupied with advocating for a more accessible campus, held their first all-abilities dance that spring. New communities did, indeed, emerge. Hayes began incorporating studio visits by one of the Four Rehearsals performers, dancer JoAnne Fluke, founder of GrooveAbility, a wheelchair dance organization in Kansas City. Two students in Tucker’s seminar (this time entitled “Theories of Embodiment”) conducted an oral history of the Four Rehearsals ensemble and published an open-access digital article curating the interviews (Lair and Mog, “Four Rehearsals”). They later published a print article in a peer-reviewed journal (Lair and Mog, “Embodied Knowledge”).

Beginning in October 2015, our partnership with Independence Inc. expanded to include our local public library, with all-ability community AUMI jams and recording sessions, that integrate not only disciplines, but communities on- and off-campus, disability communities, and people not previously connected to disability communities. Tucker and graduate student Caleb Lázaro Moreno utilized funding available from the Office of Undergraduate Research to scaffold a class project for Tucker’s honors class, AMS 101: Introduction to American Studies: Improvising Democracy, in spring of 2016. In August of 2017, AUMI-KU InterArts brought internationally acclaimed drummer, composer, improviser, and founder of We Are All Musicians (WAAM) Jesse Stewart to offer a series of all-ability workshops and concerts, funded by a National Endowment for the Arts’ ArtWorks Grant and additional funding from the University of Kansas Commons and the Department of Dance. Again, improvisation in, across, and beyond the liberal arts facilitated dialogues that connected weight-sharing, sending and receiving sound, and questions of embodiment, difference, equity, and community that occupy all human interactions and form the crux of inquiry in the arts, humanities, and sciences.
In 2016 and 2017, Hayes collaborated with the Department of Speech-Language-Hearing: Sciences and Disorders to create integrated dance workshops for adults who use adaptive and augmentative communication devices (AAC) and Dance majors. These experiences were modeled on the exercises gleaned from classroom improvisation experiences and the rehearsal process for “(Un)Rolling the Boulder.” Sessions began with introductions that sometimes included the communication devices, then progressed to mirroring, following and “flocking,” then “call and response” duets, integrating touch and sharing weight where it was welcome. Each gathering culminated in a jam session to popular music that involved “picking up” movements from the members of the group. Since the composition of the group changed based on attendance, the design of the session varied according to the bodies who gathered. The movement vocabulary and pacing changed in response to the needs of the performers, although the concepts remained consistent. For researchers in Speech-Language-Hearing: Sciences and Disorders, the sessions represented an opportunity for socialization, creative expression and community-building for adults who use AAC devices. Taking a disability studies perspective, the isolation of people with disabilities and the division of people into categories like “disabled” and “able-bodied” comes from “a largely oppressive practice that cultures visit upon persons with, or regarded as having, functional impairments.” (Lubet 133) Improvising the “stretched” boundaries of community works against this isolation and helps us develop new practices for communication diversity.

The liberal arts can shelter disparate pursuits, but also can generate collaborative improvisational possibilities. In the scholarly dialogue that emerges, the disciplines borrow strategies and produce new meanings. The key is to seek collaborators who craft shared dreamscapes in which each may see their vision and mission. We may look to improvisatory pedagogical collaborations such as the experimental classes of trumpet player Bill Dixon and dancer Judith Dunn in the 1960s, in which teaching together “against the grain” challenged “power relations between musicians and dancers” and “improvisational choices were never merely about form” (Goldman 69). Our shared dreamscapes included developing a praxis that motivates teaching and inspires research in a dynamic interactive relationship. Pedagogy isn’t just something we do to justify our research; it drives new inquiries. These explorations, in turn, invigorate our classroom experiences and investigate the creative possibilities embedded within the seemingly narrow parameters of our course goals, disciplinary methodologies, and configurations of identity, affinity, and community. This work demands a presence that is mindfully embodied, critically aware, and accountable to all bodies in the environment; a combination with much to gain, and much to contribute, through thoughtful improvisational grafting across the liberal arts and collaborative tending of new growth.

Notes

1 For more on Medusa’s approach to creative collaboration see, Medusa, “Medusa, interviewed by Mako Fitts and Michelle Habell-Pallán.”

2 We would like to thank the anonymous reader who encouraged us to consider how our pedagogical grafting relates to the “conceptual grafting” of Anthony Braxton.

3 Michelle Heffner Hayes adapted the “enter/exit” exercises from Susan Foster’s compositional
pedagogy.

4 The Wiki, in fact, became part of the *Trees and Other Ramifications* exhibit (March 5 - June 7, 2009) and continues to live on, linked to the Spencer Research Museum exhibit webpage. (trees.faculty.ku.edu/8cf04a9734132302f96da8e113e80ce5.html)

5 For more information, visit: aumi.ku.edu/what-ku-aumi-interarts.

6 For more information, visit: improvisationinstitute.ca/research-project/adaptive-use-musical-instruments. To download AUMI, visit: aumiapp.com.

Works Cited


“Observation/Study.” *Kansas University*, trees.faculty.ku.edu/0a3dac2314e66e15240f019afcbd6b0f.html.


“What is KU-AUMI InterArts?” *University of Kansas*, aumi.ku.edu/what-ku-aumi-interarts.