Special Issue: Improvisation and the Liberal Arts

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The inspiration for this special issue of Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation was born from a conference that took place at Amherst College in 2014. Sponsored by the Alliance to Advance Liberal Arts Colleges, the conference brought together faculty researchers and artists from fifteen liberal arts colleges and research universities in North America. Representing fields as varied as biology, philosophy, English, music, dance, visual art, comparative literature, and computer science, the conference centered on ways in which improvisation is the focus of research and pedagogy in the liberal arts. Lofty in our aspirations, we adopted a simple premise about both improvisation and the liberal arts: like improvisation, the liberal arts advance our understanding of how individuals and communities interact with and relate to one another, and derive meaning from human experience.

The energy following the conference led to a call for submissions for this special issue, an ambitious call hoping to present scholarship, creative work, and pedagogies that positions improvisation (in any expressive modality) within or in relation to the liberal arts, broadly defined. Among the four special topics articles included in this issue, is one written by a presenter at the conference (Dominic Poccia). Although not included here, several other essays were also submitted for the current issue that focus on dance performance and pedagogy, architecture, and intensive liberal arts pedagogy. We hope these will be included in a follow-up special issue focused on improvisation and the liberal arts.

We take the “liberal arts” to refer to several interrelated concepts: a type of intellectual inquiry for which reason, analysis, and interpretation are primary modes; a particular type of educational institution that centers this philosophy, namely, the liberal arts college; a group of academic fields (artes liberales) and an educational system that traces back to ancient Greece; and a pedagogical system that has served as the basis for contemporary higher education. Today, the liberal arts are both a mode of inquiry and a fundamentally interdisciplinary space—striving to privilege no particular field, to embrace equally the humanities, the arts, and the sciences, and to nurture and create connections across these disparate disciplines—within which different knowledges come together to create a broader, more collaborative and community-oriented understanding of humanity, our various perspectives and locations within the world (what some call a “well-informed citizenry”).

Improvisation studies engages wide-ranging interdisciplinary perspectives revealing how improvisation matters within and across different historical traditions, in ways that frequently embody critical and creative ontologies common in the liberal arts. Influential work on improvisation is now taking place in a number of fields, including anthropology and sociology; architecture and urban studies; cognitive and computer science; contemplative studies; cultural studies; dance studies and dance composition; economics; education; film and media studies; gender and sexuality studies; linguistics; literary theory; musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory; neuroscience and psychology; performance studies; philosophy; theology; peace and reconciliation studies; and elsewhere. Within these numerous, overlapping discourses, improvisation emerges as a “polymorphous” and “polysemic” human activity (Fischlin and Heble 31). Similarly, George E. Lewis suggests that “improvisation is everywhere but it’s very hard to see, because this ubiquitous practice of everyday life, fundamental to the existence and survival of every human formation, is as close to universal as contemporary critical method could responsibly entertain. And thus... the humanistic and scientific study of improvisation can provide us with new understandings of the human condition” (“2011 University Lecture at
A number of recent multidisciplinary edited volumes on improvisation reveal this potential across numerous fields and are a promising development that gives greater depth to how we understand the ubiquity of improvisation. In the coming years, we are confident that more work will be done to understand how ideas about improvisation—its nature, its purpose, its capacity to catalyze social change—differ or are similar in various disciplinary contexts, and how these variations or similarities across context(s) provide potential transformations in practice and in theorizing a more interdisciplinary future.

Improvisation’s many manifestations—in and beyond the liberal arts—serve as models of engagement with the world that bring together, in perhaps its most aspirational forms, critical thinking and creative activity in dialogic and non-hierarchical ways. Such a critical-creative model for both knowledge production and interaction illuminates processes of individualism, collectivism, and community formation; promotes empathy and understanding across social and cultural boundaries; encourages negotiation, debate, and consensus; and emphasizes listening, attending and presencing, and active participation in the world.

That improvisation functions across disciplinary contexts and expressive modes affirms a theme that emerges in every contribution to this special issue: the intersections between improvisation and the liberal arts are often fundamentally interdisciplinary. Liberal arts education frequently eschews pre-professional, vocational, and “instrumentalist” assumptions about the goals and nature of higher education and instead emphasizes broader critical thinking and engagement. This plays out in a complex push and pull between broad curriculum—general education and core requirements are good examples of this—and more discipline-specific courses that fulfill degree requirements. The contributions to this special issue demonstrate how pedagogy, interdisciplinarity, and improvisation can come together in ways that decenter this dichotomy or binary of breadth and depth, and instead put in its place a rich interdisciplinary pedagogy that privileges the confluence of practice-based approaches and intellectual theorizing. Riffing on Derrida and others, this kind of inevitable and natural interdisciplinarity, as Daniel Fischlin (2018) argues, is a necessary “moving on” or “living on” that reveals the potential of improvisation to address the pressing issues of our time, to catalyze change and to give voice to those often marginalized.

As with our liberal arts curricula and communities, we hope uses of improvisation tend toward productive, socially engaged, and liberatory interactions. We are also aware of ways in which neoliberal capitalism and transnational corporatism have drawn on improvisatory traditions to forward ideas of progress, professional development, and corporate innovation that provide little support for the peoples and communities who have developed these traditions. Corporate training workshops designed to harness creativity, mobility, and resilience of improvisatory thinking in the workplace, as well as the codification of “tradition,” power, marketing, and access to public funding in public neoconservative jazz advocacy and non-profit corporatism (seen, for example, in the organizations Jazz at Lincoln Center and SF Jazz), are but two examples of the contradictory ethics at play when improvisatory traditions meet mainstream neoliberal corporatism. In these contexts, one might ask: Where are the originators and innovators of these traditions of improvisation in these corporate contexts? Are they also profiting from the mining of improvisation’s benefits to benefit neoliberal capitalist production? Have they lost access to the financial ramifications of improvisation’s radically transformative potentials, as well as the potential to accumulate wealth in ways that provide prolonged benefits to their descendants and their communities?

Even though we don’t believe so, such thinking might be considered alarmist, or reactionary, or even wrong. In any case, the uneven relationship between improvisation and public discourse
plays out in other ways too. Take, for example, what might be called the “public pejorative” of improvisation, the ways in which improvisation—and especially its adjective form “improvised”—is frequently used to describe insufficient or poorly planned action around a pressing public issue or catastrophic moment. News media accounts of government unpreparedness or insufficient planning to address problems are often labeled “improvised” and the even more alarming and dangerous concatenation of images around the term “improvised explosive device” frequently cast negative and problematic assumptions about improvisation in public discourse.

This “pejorative” trope of improvisation—incomplete, not well thought out, contingent, needing revision, perhaps even dangerous—certainly has its precursors in music studies. The different ways that improvisation and composition relate to temporality, for example, have sometimes been used to grant more aesthetic value and privilege to composition while devaluing improvisation. By virtue of it being out of time, being revisable, the compositional process occurs for a longer period of time than the act of a composition’s performance. At the same time, then, improvisation occurs in the moment, is not revisable, it is an aesthetic, social, and political act that occurs in real time. For some coming from this perspective, the assumption is that composition will always be a completed and revised aesthetic object while improvisation will be fleeting, contingent, incomplete, and in need of revision—even as compositional process is itself profoundly tied to improvisatory strategies.

Such dichotomies between improvisation and composition are often belied by actual practices. In many musical traditions, for example, improvisation and composition comfortably co-situate and even are ontological requisites. Some composers and choreographers use improvisation as a primary compositional process, and in many African American musical forms—“jazz” being one example—individually composed pieces are often creatively and meticulously reworked in collaborative contexts, so much so that facile understandings of single authorship quickly become insufficient in describing the nature of the work. While copyright law and intellectual property rights seem to privilege single authorship over collaborative authorship, so much in the tangled relationship between improvisation and composition point to a more complex way of thinking about authorship and ownership.

Even though the essays included in this special issue do not necessarily take up the issues above—corporate appropriations of improvisation; the “public pejorative” of improvisation; debates about aesthetic value around composition and improvisation—we believe that ideas about improvisation emerging in the liberal arts will have an influence on future ways of thinking about improvisation and its relationship to cultural production. Indeed, the stakes around these issues are as pressing now as they have ever been in the modern world. The profound, devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social interaction, economic opportunity, and the health and welfare of the world’s population is most pronounced in marginalized communities, and often communities of color. The recent brutal murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other Black people in the United States at the hands of illiberal law enforcement practices has rightfully been met with profound outrage, widespread protest, and demands for a thorough and honest reckoning with racism. While necessary physical distancing practices have deeply impacted higher education, the shift to remote teaching and learning in the liberal arts has forced many of us to rethink basic assumptions about close colloquy and physical co-location. We believe that the kind of intellectual inquiry associated with the liberal arts will provide crucial paths forward in this challenging time. The creative-critical model we outline above, built on reason, analysis, and interpretation, will help us to imagine a positive future beyond COVID-19, a future in which we consistently and urgently dismantle racism and other forms of systemic discrimination and
oppression.

The contributions to this special issue of *CSI / ÉCI* reveal how the role of improvisation—and improvisation studies—in the liberal arts help to address these issues. We hope that this will inspire others to think deeply about how improvisation and interdisciplinarity bring to life new ways of embodying the intellectual inquiry and discovery at the core of the liberal arts.

**Addendum from Daniel Fischlin**

Adding to the richness of this Special Issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* focused on improvisation and the Liberal Arts, we're pleased to publish two additional Notes and Opinion pieces, by Dawn Matheson and Ben Finley, and a dialogic essay co-composed by Toby Wren and Ghatam Suresh Vaidyanathan. The three additions collectively expand upon the vocabulary of improvisation that has been this journal's mandate to address since we began publication in 2004.

Matheson's compelling personal account of her experiences at the *Musical Improvisation at Land's End / Coin-du-Banc en Folie* (MILE) summer camp in 2018 takes the notion of dream vision as it transforms into the gift of improvised performance, tracing how dream and improvisation across multiple media intersect. Ben Finley, discussing his experiences at the 2019 Summer Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation and the 2019 edition of the MILE camp, asks "How can we compose a lasting connection to places with listener-participants?"— and suggests a place-based notational and improvised practice that offers "in dialogue, the many ways of cohabiting and listening to each other," concluding that "music has many ecologically significant parts to play" in such a practice.

Wren and Vaidyanathan address hybrid practices associated with Carnatic traditional musicking and jazz, making substantial new contributions to imagining how to think about intercultural improvisation. In their "Alapana," they suggest, too, the aesthetic and political contexts for reimagining how we sound in the world, arguing that the ground on which intercultural and hybridized improvisations occurs is predicated on risk, volatility, and negotiation, one in which synergy and dissonance live together in expansive sounding practices that allow for differential new meanings to emerge.

As provocative new thinking emerges and aligns with these new sounding practices, new forms of knowledge and new articulations of those are called for. This special issue charts some of those novel pathways and vocabularies, even as it adds to the rich ecologies of knowledge that continue to gather momentum in the field of critical studies in improvisation.

**Notes**

1 See “Liberal Arts Literacies,” a research initiative working group at the University of California Humanities Research Institute.

2 Notably, these include Midgelow (2019), Born, et al. (2017), Lewis and Piekut (2016), Siddall and Waterman (2016), Heble and Laver (2016, a volume focused more on music education), Caines and Heble (2015), and Albright and Gere (2003).
Contrary to the dichotomizing of liberal arts versus vocational training, Louis Menand interestingly argues that “[k]nowledge *is* just instrumental” (53, original italics).

See, for example, Laver (2015) and Chapman (2018).

See also James (2019).

One of countless examples of this is Glenn Thrush and Peter Baker, “Trump’s Threat to North Korea Was Improvised” (2017).

A vintage example of this is Foss (1962).

**Works Cited**


