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Mirja Karjalainen-Väkevä

Presentation: Using improvisational skills in teaching music and drama

Abstract

How can techniques adapted from improvisation in music and drama promote creative teaching and learning? Firstly, I discuss why improvisation is important in teaching. I present aspects of improvisation relevant to both dramatic and musical improvisation, and reflect on how these skills could also serve teaching, especially in the subjects of drama and music.

Keywords

Drama; Boreale; Music; Improvisation; Explore; Express; Exchange.

In this article I discuss how techniques adapted from improvisation in music and drama can promote creative teaching and learning. Firstly, I discuss why improvisation is important in teaching. I present aspects of improvisation relevant to both dramatic and musical improvisation, and reflect on how these skills could also serve teaching, especially in the subjects of drama and music.

The need for this research and the interest in it came from the new National Core Curriculum for Finnish comprehensive schools, which will come into force in 2016 (POPS 2014). According to the new curriculum, learning should be participatory and collaborative and should promote creativity. Teachers should be able to develop new learning environments in which students learn such things as multiliteracy in order to respond to the challenges of the twenty-first century. The new curriculum gives teachers a chance to explore new terrains of creative learning and learn better ways to promote creativity. This also means that teachers have to become increasingly creative themselves by developing learning environments that enhance creativity in their students. Fresh ideas are needed to support teachers' challenging role as guides to creativity. My belief is that teachers would benefit from studying improvisation, which is a central element in creative actions, including the act of teaching. Moreover, improvisation serves as an example of the collaborative construction of knowledge.

Teaching and improvisation share similar paradoxes (Lobman, 2011), such as tension between rules and freedom (Sawyer, 2011) and unpredictability (Burnard, 2011). Recent research shows that developing improvisational skills helps teachers deal with these paradoxes in their work. For example, in Burnard's study some teachers learned from collaborating with composers how to behave more flexibly and became more improvisational in their teaching (Burnard, 2011). Lobman's research showed that, after attending improvisation workshops, teachers improved their interaction skills by applying creativity, taking risks and listening to and accepting children's ideas (Lobman, 2005). By understanding that teaching is partly improvisational, teachers can use improvisational conventions to develop their imaginative skills and thereby their teaching skills (Dezutter, 2011; Lobman, 2006; Sawyer, 2006; Sawyer, 2014).

Improvisation has aims, terms, concepts and rules, all of which help to make it a fluent art. Which elements of improvisation could be recognised, adapted and practised in teaching? In order to identify the common elements in dramatic and musical improvisation, I examined how these are discussed in selected literature: I included scholarly literature and manuals on musical improvisation (Bailey, 1993; Berliner, 2009; Monk, 2013), theatre improvisation (Frost & Yarrow, 1990; Halpern, Close & Johnson, 1994; Johnstone, 2012; Johnstone, 2014; Spolin, 1999) and improvisation in teaching (Dezutter, 2011; Lobman, 2005; Lobman, 2011; Sawyer, 2006; Sawyer, 2014). I focused on collaborative improvisation literature, which serves drama and music teaching better than does individual improvisation. In this literature the following concepts for enabling successful collaborative improvisation are discussed: *shared cultural conventions, presence, spontaneity, accepting ideas, the idea that mistakes do not exist, and group mind.*

Shared cultural conventions

Collaborative improvisation is possible only if the participants share certain cultural conventions, such as language, gestures, phrases or structures. When musicians improvise, they collectively combine and develop in real-time previously learned musical ideas to create a new, personal, unique and surprising whole (Berliner, 2009). In theatre improvisation the cultural conventions include, for example, formulaic speech, catch phrases and references to cultural works (Sawyer, 2006).

In teaching drama, improvisation is more complicated, because a drama teacher improvises on two levels: by using theatre improvisation conventions in the rehearsals and by using pedagogical conventions in teaching. Teachers improvise as they navigate among pedagogical options, change plans and create conventions that suit different groups. Students not only learn theatre improvisation, but also the pedagogical conventions that enable such extemporization.

Presence

Being present is essential to improvising. Being present means »...*concentrating without straining, attending and behaving in accord with the situation*« (Frost & Yarrow 1990, 101). An actor or a musician should follow through each moment to observe the impulses given and to make connections between the impulses in the moment (Halpern et al., 1994). The whole is made up of ideas that link together, and the improviser must be able to respond to the impulses by being fully present.

Teachers who use open learning environments have to face unpredictability and prepare themselves for a variety of learning processes. Teachers have to concentrate on the ongoing action and listen to their students in order to react to their impulses. Focussing on being present helps the teacher to make connections between impulses and to react spontaneously in real-time.

Spontaneity

In music and theatre improvisations performers spontaneously and creatively combine learned conventions. Jazz musicians »...*want to go into a solo with anything preconceived*« and »...*go in with an open mind and let it develop*« (Berliner 2009, 2). They tend not to plan improvised parts beforehand, but rather trust in intuition and react spontaneously to others' playing. Improvisation happens within certain frames by spontaneous use of shared conventions.

The improvising teacher has to have the courage to »live in the moment« and make spontaneous decisions within the pedagogical and curricular frameworks. Acting spontaneously according to the needs of different groups allows a learning environment to become collaborative, yet at the same time the teacher has to be aware of the frameworks.

Accepting ideas

The major rule in collaborative improvisation can be expressed in two words: *yes and* – , meaning accepting and continuing ideas without judging them as good or bad (Halpern et al., 1994; Johnstone, 2012; Monk, 2013; Sawyer, 2014). All ideas are good enough to be developed during the improvisation process. Also, accepting and continuing ideas makes

improvisation fluent and advances the action. Thus, accepting an idea does not mean that you have to literally say »yes« to everything; it means an open attitude to the things that are happening.

In a school context the teacher may face situations in which accepting all the ideas expressed is not possible. Learning is outlined by various parameters (i.e. the curriculum and the pedagogical aims), and some ideas may conflict with these parameters. The teacher has to decide whether the ideas are accepted and actualized or, if that is not possible, how the ideas could be part of the learning process, for example, through discussion.

Accepting and continuing ideas offered by the students enables a teacher to create a collaborative learning environment. Acceptance makes the students' ideas important and encourages them to express themselves. Furthermore, being aware that all ideas are good enough can encourage the students to express themselves freely. By responding to impulses, the teacher acts as an example of a creative and collaborative practitioner. Students see an example of what it is to act collaboratively in a creative process: to give an impulse and then to accept and continue the impulses of others.

»Mistakes don't exist«

The idea that ideas are not judged as good or bad means that there are no mistakes in improvisation. All ideas can be accepted, and they become the collective material of the group (Halpern et al., 1994). Put another way, the job of fellow improvisers is to accept the ideas expressed and make them part of the whole. By so doing, the student performers enact the idea that there are no mistakes, just parts of the shared collaborative process that emerge piece by piece. Creating the whole might include ideas that compete with each other. For example, in an improvised act some ideas might get more attention and carry on the story or in a musical improvisation some ideas might become motifs repeated several times. Still, all the ideas are important as parts of the whole.

At school students create the whole, piece by piece, in a collaborative learning process with the teacher. Some ideas in collaborative learning can be focussed on and developed more than others, but all are important in the learning process. Competing ideas can help define the main themes, and surprising suggestions which at first might seem to be mistakes can lead the process in interesting new directions.

Group mind

In successful collaborative improvisation the performers work for the whole group, not for themselves as individuals (Monk, 2013). The members of the group are working towards the same, shared, goal. Ideally, working together towards the same goal develops into a group mind (Sawyer, 2006), which means that the group works as if it had 'one mind, many bodies'. Usually, this happens in theatre groups, for example, in which the performers have often improvised together and know each other well.

Achieving a group mind in a school class can be complicated. Pupils' motivations for learning differ, as do social skills. A group mind can be seen as the result when the other core concepts of improvisation are working in practice. One way of achieving a group mind is to work towards the same goal by following the rules of improvisation.

The improvising drama teacher – simultaneously a teacher and an artist

In teaching improvisation the drama teacher improvises on two levels: both as a teacher and as an artist. Firstly, in teaching improvisationally, the teacher uses pedagogical structures and frameworks creatively as cultural conventions enabling improvisation. The teacher has to know a wide range of pedagogical options in order to be able to accept students' ideas and guide the whole process within the curricular framework. Secondly, whenever teachers participate in artistic improvisation by using conventions of the art form, they serve as an example of an improvising artist who is simultaneously scaffolding the students.

By developing improvisation in both teaching and in art (i.e. in the theatre), a teacher can develop creative instruction and thereby promote students' resourcefulness. The teacher promotes the learning of creativity by organizing environments in which creativity is possible. In these circumstances the teacher supports and encourages the students' imaginative actions by being an example, both as a teacher and an artist.

The theme of the conference called Drama Boreale 2015 was to *explore, express, and exchange*. In developing creative learning environments, teachers *explore* the creativity of teaching. Teachers *express* themselves as teachers and artists by promoting students' self expression. They also *exchange* ideas in collaborative learning processes with the students. In this challenging task the elements and conventions of improvisation can help teachers to act and react more collaboratively with the students.

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Mirja Karjalainen-Väkevä: A music and drama teacher in a comprehensive school. She is a postgraduate at the University of Helsinki in the Faculty of Behavioural Sciences. She is writing a thesis on how improvisation could support teachers in giving instruction in music and drama and also help pupils in learning these subjects. Her aim is to become a better teacher who combines drama and music creatively.