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## **KEY TO THE CLASSROOM: COLLEGE TEACHING AS IMPROVISATION**

**T**eaching is virtually all improvisation. To paraphrase the oft-quoted truism about military strategy, no lesson plan survives first contact with students. Teachers field unexpected questions and chase after a class discussion that has gone off on a tangent. We change activities when it becomes clear what was planned and what is happening aren't matching up, and we search for ways to engage students whose eyes are glazing over halfway through a lecture. And, of course, we seek ways to work around the fact that a meticulously crafted PowerPoint presentation or thought-provoking YouTube clip can't be shown because, inevitably, the classroom computer is on the fritz right when it's needed.

Music rather than the military offers an even better analogy to the way improvisation works in the classroom. Ideally, what happens is both performative and collaborative. In the most obvious version of this metaphor, the students play the audience to the teacher's solo performer, but even that doesn't quite get at the true dynamic involved. In an era increasingly suspicious of the "sage-on-a-stage" model of instruction, we might more profitably see the teacher as a band leader and the class as a whole as an ensemble. The teacher picks the tune, sets the tempo, calls out chord changes, and brings things in (hopefully) to a coordinated conclusion, but everyone in the room is playing off each other.

At least, that's where I'm at after roughly 15 years of teaching at the college level. But I had to discover it on my own. At no point in my graduate career was I taught the skills of instructional improvisation. I got some guidance on writing a syllabus, coming up with assignments, responding to student work, etc. But almost none at all at the performative aspect of teaching.

I'm not alone. In discussions with friends and colleagues in higher education, I've found that virtually none of us actually got instruction in classroom improvisation (also known as "teaching").

Not only did we not get instruction in this, but we continue to practice this skill in virtual isolation, rarely watching each other perform or even talking about it in much specificity.

The sense I get from folks I know in the world of primary and secondary education is that their situation is a bit different. Students learning to become elementary or high school teachers do a great deal of learning the performative aspects of the job under the tutelage of their professors. They do student teaching where they get feedback from multiple sources

and are asked to reflect systematically about how and why some things work and some things don't. In other words, even if they don't use the word "improvisation," faculty in departments of education understand that their charges will need to learn these skills in order to jam with the K-12 set.

But in the world of "higher" education, we largely ignore the performative, improvisational art of classroom teaching. What are the reasons? It's hard to say. Some might naively assume that with deep knowledge of a subject comes knowledge of how to teach it to others. Perhaps it's the tradition of "academic freedom" and misplaced assumptions that to talk about how to best perform in the classroom is to impinge on the prerogatives of faculty to run the classroom the way they want. Most mistakenly of all, perhaps we in higher ed somehow think that "performing" is beneath us—not something that applies when working with students who are, ostensibly, adults.

Whatever the reasons, they aren't good.

Perhaps this link between improvisation and teaching comes to my mind readily because I happened to start learning to play the guitar when at about the same time I first started teaching college writing. A fan of improvisational music, particularly blues guitar, I bought a used Fender Stratocaster knock-off and a tiny amp and started to learn how to make up simple melody lines as I played along with blues records.

But I had advantages in learning musical improvisation that I didn't as an aspiring college teacher. There were books and videos that laid out in detail how and why certain notes "worked" as part of a blues chord progression better than others. I could listen to recordings of folks like B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Eric Clapton, going beyond simply appreciating the music as a listener to actually using them as models for imitation, slowing down recordings and learning solos lick by lick. And one couldn't walk past any bulletin board in my college town without seeing multiple offers by people to provide guitar lessons.

Not so with teaching. I probably had more help than many—I at least got a three-day crash course in teaching first-year rhetoric just before being pushed onstage the first time. I know many who didn't even get that. But even this instruction focused on larger, behind-the-scenes issues like course design. Little to no time was spent explaining how to pace an actual class session or what to do if the overhead projector didn't work.

Putting this in terms of music reveals how daunting a task the new college instructor faces. It would be as if, wanting to learn how to play guitar, I was only presented with broad, theoretical issues of chord progressions and pentatonic scales but nothing about the actual tactics of manipulating the strings.

New college teachers can think back to their time as students and try to remember what seemed to work, but when you're a student, you're generally not watching your teachers to pick up pointers; you're focusing on content. The same is true with music. When you're a listener, you're simply enjoying the music for its own sake. When you want to make music yourself, you listen in a much different way—focusing on issues of how and why. Rather than having access to recordings of the best-of-the best when it comes to improvisation and figuring out how to break down their style and find aspects of it they can make their own, new college teachers suddenly have their cd collection confiscated right when they most need it.

And, intentionally or not, there is little in the way of improvisational lessons for college teachers. One might be lucky enough to find a mentor who is willing to show you the ropes and share some tricks, but there seems to be a widespread sense that to talk too explicitly about the performative aspect of teaching is somehow indelicate, inappropriate, or embarrassing. To invite others to watch you teach and give you feedback (or invite yourself to watch others) is largely just not done, outside of perhaps the once-a-year mandatory teaching observation by a supervisor, which is an evaluative rather than instructive situation.

What might be done? Here are a few thoughts.

Borrow (or steal) licks from others and adapt them to yourself. Specifically, make use of the relatively large amount of materials out there on classroom management for K-12 teachers. Some of these resources can be startlingly parallel to the sort of materials available for aspiring improvisational musicians. For example, on my office bookshelf, I have a title called *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that put students on the Path to College* by Doug Lemov. Not only does it have highly tactical instructional “licks” that can be used in the classroom in a variety of situations, but it even comes with a DVD in which these techniques are demonstrated. This follows a format familiar to denizens of music stores where you will often find instructional books packaged with CDs or DVDs that demonstrate the actual performance of techniques rather than simply describing them.

As the title suggests, the book is designed for K-12 educators, but it’s not as if the entire dynamic of teaching changes between 12<sup>th</sup> and “13<sup>th</sup>” grade. Indeed, many of us in higher ed are all too aware that, particularly in the freshman and sophomore years, we’re still dealing with students who are still very much high schoolers emotionally and intellectually. Do these techniques have to be adapted a bit to fit a college context? Probably. Are some techniques designed to be used with 2<sup>nd</sup> graders probably unsuited for dealing with 20-year-olds? Of course. But there are underlying principles those of us in higher ed can learn from our colleagues in the K-12 world.

Jam with others. About the only times I’ve invited others to watch me teach is when I had to do so as part of formal evaluation. Similarly, when I served as director of writing at my university and had the responsibility of evaluating our adjunct faculty, I only asked to stop by a single class session (so as not to impose myself on those I was evaluating). And in both cases—observer and observed—the person doing the observations largely remained passive. When being observed, I rarely if ever prompted my colleague who was “sitting in” with us to participate. And when observing, I remained as unobtrusive as possible, finding a seat in the back corner of the room so as to keep the observer effect on both instructor and students to a minimum.

But does any of that make sense? Perhaps we should more freely sit in on each other’s classes, establishing a culture where having colleagues in the classroom with us is not synonymous with evaluation. And when we do, we should invite these visitors to participate, to take a chorus or two themselves. Afterwards, we can talk a bit about what worked and what didn’t, but in a climate of collaboration (and perhaps commiseration) rather than evaluation. And as most great musical improvisers will tell you, playing with people who push you, who introduce new ideas, who explore areas you might not have on your own, raises your own level of performance.

Practice improvisation in other contexts. Developing just enough confidence in my guitar playing to be willing to get up on stage at a local open-mic jam session at a neighborhood bar helped me feel more confident in my ability to wing it in other situations. Not that I played well. I didn't (and don't). But just practicing improvisation in that context made me feel that I could handle myself a bit better when it came to something that I supposedly had expertise in: teaching college students how to write.

I had a similar experience when learning the Japanese martial art of aikido. Although the basic motions and techniques are highly choreographed, you gradually begin to develop the ability to apply the underlying techniques to novel situations, and this becomes a central part of practice sessions at higher levels. Aikido was particularly helpful in this because of its focus on not resisting or fighting back against an attack, but blending with energy coming from an unexpected direction and channeling it in a way so that both you and the person initiating the attack leave the encounter without being seriously hurt (a bit like a skilled instrumentalist not taking a new musical idea offered by a bandmate as a challenge but as an opportunity). Again, I found myself feeling a bit more confident when standing in front of a classroom that I could apply this dynamic in my teaching.

I strongly suspect that college teachers would find the same experience if they took a class in improvisational comedy, learned ballroom dancing, studied a new language, or engaged in any other activity that required a certain amount of adapting, performing, and thinking on one's feet.

Of course, the ideal situation would be to not rely on analogous activities—even one as close to college teaching as secondary education. Creating a greater awareness of teaching-as-performance with the understanding that performing requires skill, practice, and mentoring would be an effort worth undertaking for colleges and universities. I say this as much to push myself as to offer advice to others. I'm as guilty as anyone of not addressing the improvisational quality of teaching, either in my own practice or as a mentor to others.

This will require fostering a sense of trust among faculty (trust being a central component of improvisation of any sort). Academics are prone (often with good reason) to be wary of practices that might be packaged in benevolent language but end up being used to impinge on their academic freedom. I suspect the best first steps would be for college faculty, informally and independently of any administrative oversight, to find a handful of collaborators to "jam" or "sit in" with, as a way of sharing and developing these skills. Having improvisational pedagogy formally imposed by well-meaning administrators likely would cause more problems than it solved. However, faculty creating their own groups with trusted colleagues would minimize the cultural shift from seeing college teaching as a solo enterprise to a more collaborative one.

Once such a group, however small and informal, began producing results in the form of more engaged and engaging faculty, I suspect it would snowball, albeit in appropriately random and unexpected ways, throughout the campus.

At the very least, it seems worth a try. As improvisation in any context shows us, waiting around to come up with the "perfect" idea is a recipe for stagnation. Sometimes you get the most magical results when you embrace not knowing and give it a go.

**References**

Lemov, D. (2010) *Teach like a champion: 49 techniques that put students on the path to college*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.