

The Creativity of Improvisers

The creativity of improvisers is regarded with awe by people who believe themselves less witty, spontaneous, charismatic, less able to tell tales, shape shift, collaborate in teams and inspire others with imagination. On the other hand, many dismiss improvisation as trivial, formulaic entertainment that panders to the lowest common denominator. After all, everyone can do it, and it isn't far elevated above child's play. Both views are right, because improvisation is exercise for human being, as surely as a nautilus machine works out muscles. Everyone can do it. The number of hours a day we spend at it becomes apparent as our spontaneity, flexibility, and assertiveness increase. But the real advantage of improvisation is that it works out the whole human in the whole context of our experience. My thesis is that intentional improvisation is the best training we have to integrate psycho-physical faculties. It integrates conscious and unconscious cognitive processes in a performance situation as immediate as life itself. Although our habitual, personal modes of perception influence the way we improvise, we can train ourselves to improve: first in the improvisation, then in the life. This is possible because, unintentionally, we utilize the structures of improvisation in consciousness itself.

1. Dramatic Consciousness

I find that the language of consciousness theorists like Robert Ornstein and Julian Jaynes, who are working to interpret neurological discoveries, articulates my experience regarding the conscious aspects of improvisation. According to Jaynes, consciousness is:

...not involved with perception or reaction. It is not involved in the performance of skills and often hinders their execution...It is not at all involved in signal learning and need not be involved in the learning of skills, structures or solutions, which can go on without any consciousness at all.

Jaynes suggests that consciousness is the ability to narrativize an "as if" abstract analog of reality, and to project an imagined "analog 'I'" into the consequent scenario which it will ultimately attempt to conciliate into a unified theory of reality. Thus consciousness allows us to "shortcut behavioural processes and arrive at more adequate decisions."² No more trial and error: instead, analogical, self aware thought. Conscious-

ness kicks in under circumstances of stress --unknown futures-- which need fast solutions. Ornstein writes, "very few of our decisions get shunted up to consciousness; only those that need a toplevel decision about alternatives."³

I am interested in the parallel between improvisational inventiveness and this version of consciousness, "involved when deliberate, rather than automatic, control or intervention is needed" where, "our normal waking consciousness builds us a model of the world, based on sense and body information, expectations, fantasy and crazy hopes and other cognitive processes."⁴ Improvisation exactly mirrors this spontaneous and fundamentally human process in the performance situation. Ornstein suggests that if any conscious assumptions are destroyed, "an altered state of consciousness may result."⁵ This is the very function of improvisation: to provide a meta-consciousness, a consciousness of conscious functions --and to wreak horrible, warped and hilarious abuse upon that consciousness to show that we can survive any change, and the up-ending of our most sacred beliefs. For, just as consciousness is analogical in providing us with a model of reality somewhat removed from immediate perceptive experience, so the improviser takes this model and proliferates it to create rival analogues of possible realities. This is "self-reflexive" activity, according to drama theorists.⁶ It understands and interacts with social-political constructs, presents viable, considered models of human behaviour, and communicates insights and value judgements about them. Good, very good. Close, in fact, to writing an English essay.

The problem is, if we try to improvise out of purely conscious intention, we can't do it at all. We become completely tied up in justifications, explanations and increasing attempts to shape and control the idea. This destroys our working relationship with co-improvisers, because the first rule in improv. is, "thou shalt not control the future". So, paradoxically, while we need our consciousness active to provide challenging content, dramatic shape and social meaning, we can't use it.

2. Improvisation and the Unconscious

So there is another side to improvisation: in fact, the controversial side. When an improviser spontaneously regurgitates cultural data within popular narrative structures, this is not "conscious" at all. It can't be, or else the improviser's spontaneity would

become paralyzed. As drama therapist Jake Moreno defines spontaneity it is, "the readiness to act" involving the loosening of normal conscious constrictions, the opening of possibilities and the ability to go in the direction that "feels right."⁷ If improvisers feel very safe, unjudged and relaxed, we can open the spigots of our expressivity and hold forth, merging with the cultural reality structures we experience in our lives as we give them shape and voice in dance, speech, and action. This is what drama theorists call "subject reactive" activity. Psychologists call it "venting", and it is important to a variety of therapies from Gestalt to Holding Therapy to Primal Scream Therapy. Critics of subject reactive expression worry that, since it occurs without the involvement of the conscious mind, it cannot effect change in the lives of the improvisers, or deepen their awareness of their reality. It only makes them feel good.

Keith Johnston, the inventor of theatre sports, snorts at this concern. He declares that in order for improvisation to be possible at all, the stream of personal spontaneity must be unlocked, and that the only way to do this is to encourage improvisers that they aren't responsible for the content of their expression. Yes, this runs completely contrary to all our social training—but Johnston revels in it. "You improvise from the stuff you find "out there", he says, in the effort to get improvisers to turn off their behavioural censors and with it their social anxieties, "you are only the mouth-piece."⁸ Johnston, in common with drama theorists like Brian Way, has seen far-reaching human benefits result from spontaneity, in the areas of coping systems, self-acceptance and happiness. He agrees with the ethologist Ellen Dissanayake, who studies the survival benefits of art-making activities: self-reactive rituals undertaken by a collective to encourage a merging with perceived reality through spontaneous expression of the same, are highly beneficial to the social group. Such ritual behaviours serve to strengthen its culture and decrease its anxiety about change and unknown futures.⁹ Dissanayake argues that this spontaneous ritual behaviour was "selected for" in our species. In fact, all complex autotelic behavioural strategies that enhance the sense of belonging in a group, to a particular territory, and that alter and shape the experience of time and the significance of gesture, serve to train the individual to deal with the generalized angst of the human condition in a changeable, changing world. It seems hard to argue their importance. But those who study business culture are of the opinion that the

strong culture derived from ritual confirmation of beliefs is not always the best thing to have. "The stronger a culture, the more resistant it will be to change, and the less capable of flexing its structures so as to deal with new procedural challenges and restructuring."¹⁰ In the long run, a strong culture will engender greater anxiety in troubled times.

3. Symbiosis between Conscious and Unconscious Strategies.

Therefore, I argue that for good improvisation, self reactive strategies must exist in symbiosis with self reflexive strategies. Alone, self reactive spontaneity tends to be longwinded and predictable. I use it to create a safe environment for beginners to work in, and I use it for research into folk-beliefs, but only rarely does it throw up complex ideas I want to explore in the future. So, improvisers must be able to hip-hop from conscious to unconscious strategies in order to maintain scenario flexibility and group integrity at one and the same time.

Despite his rhetoric about spontaneity, Johnston's games prevent actors from over indulging their unconscious faculties. The games are structured so as to demand active conscious decision making and concentration on complex illogical rules. Most impose a structure where dramatic elements are deconstructed to be reassembled in performance. Typically in his work, narrative and action, or thought and action, or verbal and physical responses will be ascribed to separate actors, so that a scene can only develop as a symbiotic relationship grows between them.¹¹ In the very different improvisation training of Odin Teatret's Eugenio Barba, the improvisers' paradox, "choose the future but do not control it", is tackled through a comparable system of opposites. Barba favours a rigorous training in physical and vocal-text vocabularies, which is combined with instructions to deconstruct sequentiality, alter context, work to combine opposites and to play little games with yourself whereby you outwit your own expectations.¹²

To summarize the two basic kinds of activities used by improvisers, then: conscious solutions, precision and decision are the resources for choosing and shaping content in improvised scenarios. But in order to found the team culture which can create in the face of an unknown future, unconscious solutions, founded in relaxed spontaneity, must be deployed. Short term solutions: use your consciousness. Long term solutions: access your unconscious, with friends.

Self reactive activities are viewed with suspicion by the education system and our culture in general because of their autotelic (done for their own sake) character. Ironically, multi-national corporation "navigators" are not so conservative. They are plotting their way to profit and success using the same research, sociological assumptions, procedural strategies, and in many respects the same vocabulary as developmental drama theorists.

Manuals on executive excellence refer to stress as the "vitality quotient" necessary for professional motivation. Stress triggers desires analogous to those of improvisers: such as the desire to compete, to exercise power and to be distinct and different, (this is the hierarchical model of organization), the desire to introduce innovative solutions, to plan and establish goals and to achieve through one's own efforts, (in the task/entrepreneurial organization model), the desire to serve well, and to attain professional excellence, (in the professional organization model), and the desire to belong to a group, to have collaborative relationships and to participate democratically in process, (from the group organization model).¹³ Role motivation theory indicates how stress-triggered desires motivate individuals to structure and participate in group projects. Numerous improvisation groups foundering on personality differences would do well to read it. The counterbalance to the necessarily high stress levels is the creation of a strong culture which will support efficient and fulfilled workers. A strong culture "clarifies behaviours and expectations and allows for ease of decision making."¹⁴ The cultural rituals favoured by corporations to enable upwardly mobile executives to improvise successfully in the business environment could have been taken from Ellen Dissanayake's description of ritual. They include territorial differentiation and spatial centring, daily group conference, physical fitness programmes, celebrations of family stability, celebrations of rites of passage within the firm, autonomy through flex-time, sensual rewards through the acquisition of material possessions, luxury holidays and the conferment of status.

Ritologists such as Peter McClaren have noted the intricacies and variations of the social rituals schoolchildren go through in a day. Office workers' survival depends on similar unconscious processes. Team management consultants exist to point out to firms where the rituals are failing, resulting in demotivated, unhappy and unproductive employees.

4. Levels of Cognitive Awareness on which Improvisers must Communicate .

The strategies by which corporations create organizational culture suggest certain types of human needs and perceptions. But it is in developmental drama theory that needs and perceptions are most brilliantly described. Richard Courtney gives a comprehensive account of the different ways we understand reality.¹⁵ His studies of theatrical semiotic codes and of the different types of learning and thought engendered by dramatic activities, have led him to structure all perception into six "levels of dramatic fiction". In my work with improvisers, I teach exercises that apply to each level, because it is vital that all these possibilities are mobilized in performance. The mutual triggering of all conscious and unconscious functions in a scenario is the ultimate, pyromaniac, aim of the improviser. The following scheme indicates that the components of this process can be taught.

Courtney's first level of dramatic fiction is unconscious. It is our physical, unconscious perception of the actual world. For the improviser, the ability to respond with a pre-conscious, relaxed "Being There" immediacy to environmental stimuli is important to establishing a powerful and honest performance. Exercises that break physical habits, develop body wisdom, physical confidence, trust, non-verbal communication and the physical locations of emotion are useful in developing the performer at this level.

The second level of perception is a conscious one. It is the dramatic world, where we identify a Self and we attempt to construct a consistent, meaningful response to our experience. In training improvisers I use body-mind integration exercises which develop the ability to build narrative from a physical image, and to physicalize verbal narrative. Useful play, physical precision, mimicry, and space and time manipulation are all important to expression at this level.

Courtney's third level of dramatic fiction is the socio-fictional world, which can be either conscious or unconscious. Here, we inhabit a "role" like mother, teacher or doctor, that comes with required patterns of behaviour. For an improviser to reproduce this level of reality on stage requires a conscious political learning about power structures and modes of communication. It also requires conscious personal exploration into the role habits and interactive patterns which we as individuals build unthinkingly into our self-images. Also, the study of semiotics prepares the improviser to challenge assumptions about our social role-playing

by disordering emblems, icons and symbols. In order to improvise well at this level of defined-role play, however, considerable group trust must exist, and a shared group objective must be in place. In the words of Headlines Theatre's David Diamond, the group members must understand that to offer an oppression during an improvisation is "an act of love."¹⁶ It is always a breakthrough moment in any improvising group when the members are sufficiently comfortable to do vile and unspeakable things to each other in scenarios. The work improves: real social analysis and commentary become possible.

Courtney's fourth dramatic fiction is the conscious social aesthetic world where we explore the experience of living through enactments that mix social and personal meanings. Child's play, therapy, fiction writing, and film-making all exist on this level. For the improviser, training for this level of perception includes all the dramatic tricks needed to set up "as if" realities. This provides the all-important ability to flex between characters and worlds, so that a scenario mocking a "my little pony" cartoon evolves into an oppressive situation in a prison camp, or a hysterical soap opera scene "flashes back" to a generative reality that reveals heavy sociological causes. Exercises exploring social and personal assumptions are very beneficial to this work.

The fifth level of perceived reality is the aesthetic artistic world of theatrical performance, where we create and communicate to an audience a significant fictional space, time and meaning. If we choose to operate at this level of public performance, we must develop acting skills. Our work is to represent the world as we see it, and to shape our representation so as to reflect fundamental meanings which we gain, ideally, from the sixth level of dramatic fiction.

This is the religious world, in which we jointly create and communicate with others a sacred time, space and meaning, in metaphorical expositions of ontological causes. In improvisation training it is expressed by exercises which conciliate disparate events into a consistent and moral dramatic world. Improvisers learn to, in Courtney's verb, "metaphorize". Metaphorization mobilizes alternative modes of perception. It explores and creates symbols that express new contexts of personal and cultural relationship. Metaphorization also helps us to develop ontological and moral thinking.¹⁷ Most importantly, it enables us to utilize "the intelligence of feeling" where sense perception and cognition become partners, their

differences paradoxically united in consciousness by a metaphorical moment which is a source of intense *joie-de-vivre*.

Courtney's sixth level of metaphorizing reality depends on, and exists in symbiotic feedback with his first level: that of the actual world of immediate body perception. Heightened experience of the here and now is an important part of the religious experience. Transit between the world of the body and the world of sacred meaning requires a metaphorical leap which I call the moment of imbalance, and which Courtney characterizes as intuition. "In the purely intuitive mode", he writes, "checks are made between perceptions and concepts, but we do not work mainly through them. Rather, we try out our perceptual information against the cognitive, yet we always return to the direct apprehension."¹⁸ He further asserts that intuition is a form of "direct understanding", a form of logic based in the emotions whose aim is to short-cut conscious thought by grasping meaning at once.¹⁹ I am with the poet Christopher Dewdney, in that intuition is the source of comparative metaphor,²⁰ and I suggest its physical equivalent is the moment of imbalance. I find correspondence in the kinaesthetic image of weight-change, the transition from one balanced state to another which is, itself, a third dynamic and meaningful moment. The dynamism of movement between the conscious urge to create a unified dramatic reality, and the unconscious, physical truth of "Being There" is the key to creative improvisation. This is so particularly when that dynamic is loaded with all the other modes of perception from the six levels of dramatic fiction.

As you can see, exercises are in place to teach each of the component parts of an improviser's dramatic fiction. It is now necessary to propose, briefly, how these six levels of dramatic fiction, incorporating the *hiphop* between conscious and unconscious faculties, can actually be expressed in a successful improvisation.

5. Improvisation and the Semiotic Square

To relate drama activity to cognition, Courtney borrowed from A.J. Greimas the concept of the Semiotic Square, which maps the meaning of an idea according to similarities, contrasts, conflicts and complementarities.²¹ The Semiotic Square contributed to the "learning types" theory that describes, through the relational terms "random, concrete, abstract and linear", how individuals' learning-systems differ.

I have found that this interactive, relational quaternary describes what happens in spontaneous improvised babble. When a tired idea needs to be advanced the improviser may do so in four essentially different ways, as follows:

We can find an association within the original idea that links it to a new idea, so enlarging on our original stream (i.e. similarity). Or we may find an association through class of object, word, sound, texture or appearance (i.e. differentiation). We may simply change the context in which our idea is functioning, but hold on to the idea itself (contiguity), or in Monty Python style, we may abruptly switch to something completely different (opposition).

These improvisational strategies occur without conscious intervention. Like perception, they just happen. But I have noticed that different people, in improvisation as with learner types, favour different corners of the square. There will be one member of a group whom we can always depend upon to introduce absolutely oppositional irrelevant and non sequitur material. Another one will hold on to an idea, guiding it through a series of contexts, long after its dead and everyone else has moved on. Yet another will riff like a jazz musician advancing a melodic phrase through inversion, distortion, sounds like, reminds-me-of the time when...(differentiation). And another will insist on universalizing the idea under discussion so as to invoke spiritual significance in its proliferation of meanings. The best improvisers work with equal effectiveness from each corner of perception.. But we can all learn to do this, if we become conscious of our proclivities, and work to balance them with less habitual strategies for advancing a scene. This learning process resembles Johannes Itten's scheme for visual artists which gets them to acknowledge the "natural" palette, then stretch it.

On a different note, I have found that when a scenario incorporates three of these four distinct strategies of advancement, it leaves the audience with a sense of completion, closure, and satisfaction with the scene. A dramatic world has been created, debunked, elaborated, contrasted with other possibilities, and put to rest.

No matter how conscious an improviser is of structural strategy, however, we can never plan and execute a complete performance. We have to consciously choose content in the moment of imbalance, then shape it with our intuition, then return to conscious choice, then shape that intuitively, and so on. The

creativity of improvisers is a constant hip-hop from one side of the brain to the other. As Julian Jaynes and Oliver Sacks have noted, the brain is an extraordinarily flexible organism, and can be trained quite easily to do this.²²

6. Conclusion: Hip-hop, Zip-zop

In conclusion, then, the improvisational hip-hop draws on conscious and unconscious cognitive modes of being, using perceptive information from six levels of dramatic fiction. A scenario created from this perceptive data advances by means of an unconscious process whereby our spontaneous imagination zip-zops around the metaphoric square. Here we try to train ourselves to use all corners equally, so that we have logical story, metaphor or analogue, and just enough penguins exploding on the television to keep it interesting.

In my experience, the personal power consequent to the hip-hop zip-zop of improv is extraordinary. English as Second Language students redouble their conversation efforts and experience a diminishment of cultural isolation. Male life-term prisoners at the Edmonton Institution find, as one put it, "an escape hatch" in identifying a reality that transcends prison walls. Students' interest in the world about them, their energy to de-code it and create conscious unified reality models to explain it, increases exponentially. It is small wonder that corporate team management theory works to create effective think tanks by balancing equally the four learner-types.²³ The creativity of improvisers is something we all utilize unconsciously in daily interaction. How much improved this daily life might be if we can work to improve our skills has been better identified by corporate theorists than by our education system.

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