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## The Author



Jeff Brown holds a Ph.D. from the University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada. Over the past 20 years, he has taught at a variety of private schools, colleges and universities in several different countries. His research interests focus on critical pedagogy and the ethics of English language teaching. He teaches in the Centre for Preparatory and Liberal Studies at George Brown College in Toronto, Canada.

Email: Jeffrey.Brown2@georgebrown.ca

# Feeder Fields

## Embedding improvisation in teacher education

By Daniel Xerri, Malta

### Introduction

When I was training to become a teacher I was expected to prepare a lesson plan for every class I taught. Tutors expected these lesson plans to be compiled in a file and a satisfactory pass in Teaching Practice was partly based on this collection of lesson plans as well as on my ability to adhere to what was included in them. Despite the value of the lesson plan in encouraging me to think about my decisions prior to the lesson and in guiding me through the lesson in a structured manner, sometimes I felt like an actor being chided by the director for not repeating the lines in the script exactly as they were meant to be recited. Given the impossibility of doing another take when teaching a class, I came to believe that a pre-service teacher who deviates from the lesson plan might risk failing their Teaching Practice. While lesson planning is very important for pre-service teachers as it helps them "navigate a safe path through the jungle" (Thornbury, 2012), one thing many teachers are not trained for is how to deal with the unpredictability and spontaneity of the classroom by thinking on the spot and improvising a course of action.

Within Theatre Studies improvisation is defined as "getting on a stage and making stuff up as you go along" (Napier, 2015, p.1).

According to the theatre academic and acting coach Viola Spolin (1963), improvisation involves "setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem" (p.383). Keith Johnstone (1981), one of the pioneers of improvisational theatre, believed that the effort not to control the future enables actors to be spontaneous. This is because "when we think ahead, we miss most of what's happening (on the stage as in life)" (Johnstone, 1999, p.130). Improvisation is deemed to be a significant set of skills that an actor needs to develop through practice: "When it comes down to it, you can read about it until your teeth fall out, but you'll only get better by doing it. Doing it. Doing it" (Napier, 2015, p.2). Some of the skills of improvisation include being present in the scene, listening as much as possible, responding to what other actors say and do, engaging in team work, forming connections between characters, initiating actions, developing a character's point of view, and maintaining character throughout a scene. The value of improvisation is illustrated by an example from Kevin Spacey's career. During the opening night of his one-man legal drama *Clarence Darrow* at London's Old Vic, Spacey remained in character while berating an audience member whose phone rang during the performance (BBC, 2014). Spacey was delivering a courtroom speech when the phone went off. "If you don't answer that, I will!" he asserted. This served the purpose of entertaining the audience while reminding them of theatre etiquette.

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In the context of teacher education, improvisation is somewhat frowned upon given that detailed lesson planning is considered fundamental. Nonetheless, teaching is a form of performance and the ability to improvise is crucial in order to respond to situations that one would not have anticipated, as well as to better cater for learners' needs. Woodward (2004) points out that "We can do all the planning and preparation in the world for our classes but it won't stop reality from happening!" (p.230). Not everything can be pre-empted in the planning phase; in order to maximise learning it is sometimes necessary to engage in improvisation. For example, I was once teaching a class of adults and early in the lesson a student declared that he had been fired from his job the previous day. The other students immediately took an interest in their friends' predicament and started showing sympathy and asking him questions. Despite the fact that this turn of events derailed my plans for the rest of the lesson, I chose to develop the discussion even further after ensuring that the unlucky student was comfortable enough sharing his woes. This episode and many others like it opened my eyes to the value of improvisation. However, the latter is not always given a lot of importance in teacher education. One of the possible outcomes of this is that inexperienced teachers might find it difficult to improvise when the need arises. Some people argue that the ability to improvise is acquired through experience. While that is true to some extent, actor training shows us that it is also possible to prepare inexperienced performers for improvisation.

## Improvisation in Actor Training

The theatre theorist Konstantin Stanislavski is renowned for having developed the most influential of all dramatic training techniques. The Stanislavski system is based on the idea that actors need to trust their instincts and be 'in the moment' in order to realistically portray characters on stage. The psychological and physical aspects of characterisation are equally important and an actor needs to be able to perform both very well. Given that the psychological is enacted via the physical, it is essential for actors to determine which physical actions are appropriate for a particular psychological response. Improvisation is the best technique to help actors achieve this. Stanislavski (1947/2015) considered improvisation as a significant training tool: "In our kind of acting we make frequent use of improvisations... This kind of creativeness gives a freshness and an immediacy to a performance" (p.63). He believed that student actors need to be provided with the opportunity to gain skill in improvisation as early as possible:

*Our point of departure in training actors is to have them learn by acting [improvisations]... One cannot go on teaching for years in a classroom and only at the end ask a student to act. In that space of time he will have lost all creative faculty... Creativeness must never cease. (Stanislavski, 1947/2015, p.63)*

In the Stanislavski system, drama teachers are encouraged to guide student actors to develop the ability to improvise rather than imposing their own interpretations:

*It is not the job of teachers to give instruction in how to create, we should only push students in the right direction, while training their taste, requiring from them the observance of the laws of nature, and the execution of their simplest exercises carried to the point of art, which is to say absolute truthfulness and technical perfection. (Stanislavski, 1947/2015, p.63)*

Once student actors have gained skill in improvisation they will be able to capitalise on this when performing on stage in order to realistically portray a character through the exercise of the imagination: "Improvisations which they work out themselves are an excellent way to develop the imagination... Student actors who have been trained on improvisations later on find it easy to use their imaginative fancy on a play where this is needed" (Stanislavski, 1947/2015, p.64). Stanislavski's thoughts on improvisation in actor training are applicable to teacher education because in both fields we seem to value the ability of the performer to creatively respond to the context and develop the right kind of strategy to use in a specific situation.



## Improvisation in Teacher Education

Over the past few years there has been increased awareness of the value of improvisation for pre-service teachers. A number of researchers and teacher educators have come to realise that improvisation is as useful in teacher education as it is in actor training given that both teachers and actors must bank on it in their respective forms of performance. Shem-Tov (2015), for example, maintains that

*A good improvising performer as well as an improvising teacher are both well-trained, on the one hand and, on the other, both act and respond according to the here-and-now – to the occurrences of the event as it is taking place. (p.306)*

Similarly, Maheux and Lajoie (2010) indicate that improvisation is necessary because lesson planning can never prepare a teacher for all that occurs in the classroom:

*In the lived life of most, if not all, classrooms teachers are confronted with the necessity to react in the here and now: There is not always time for deliberation, and teaching is often made of stop-gaps, even if reflection can take place before or after the action. As teacher educators, it seems to us that teacher training programs should somehow prepare the students to experience the necessity to improvise in the most fertile way... if not adopt fecund improvisation as a modus operandi! (p.90)*

Incorporating improvisation in teacher education provides pre-service teachers with the ability to respond to impromptu situations and to understand that they might not always be able to rely on their lesson plan in the variable circumstances of the classroom.

Equipping pre-service teachers with the ability to improvise means enabling them to teach creatively and to promote creativity in their lessons. However, it does not imply jettisoning lesson planning and the curriculum. Beghetto and Kaufman (2011) claim that many teachers want to foster learner creativity while covering the curriculum but fear curricular chaos when teaching for creativity. Disciplined improvisation enables teachers to address this teaching paradox given that it "involves reworking the curriculum-as-planned in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of the curriculum-as-lived, thereby adding unique or fluid features to the learning of academic subject matter" (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2011, p.96).

This means that teachers need to develop an understanding that while some aspects of teaching and learning are to a large extent fixed; other aspects are much more fluid. This entails both expertise and experience. As Sawyer (2011) points out, "Skillful improvisation always resides at the tension between structure and freedom. Of course, expert teachers have deep intuition and are talented performers, but their performance is rooted in structures and skills" (p.5). Both structure and improvisation are important for pre-service teachers given that they will only "feel free to *improvise creatively* in the classroom because they feel safe in coming back to the 'anchors' they have already placed before" (Shem-Tov, 2015, p.306). Hence, lesson planning and improvisation should both feature in teacher education as they represent two sets of knowledge and skills that teachers need to capitalize on in the classroom for effective teaching and learning.

## Conclusion

Resources for teachers who wish to improvise or encourage their learners to do so already exist. Wilson (2008), for example, outlines numerous activities that bank on improvisation for the purpose of enhancing language learning and teaching. Besides doing the same kind of thing, Almond (2005) also devotes an entire chapter to activities inspired by some of the most famous improvisation theories in Theatre Studies. However, there is not much research and training material available for teacher educators wanting to train pre-service teachers in how to improvise. This gap is quite glaring given that "Teaching can...be viewed not so much as the process of realizing plans, but as a creative interaction between plans, student responses and teacher improvisation" (Richards, 2015, p.185). Nonetheless, embedding improvisation in teacher education is probably easier said than done. Perhaps any attempt to do so might first require teacher educators to look beyond ELT and develop insights from an examination of the practices employed in such a field as Theatre Studies, where improvisation is a fundamental part of actor training.

Teacher educators could adapt some of the activities created by actor trainers in order to help pre-service teachers learn how to improvise. For example, based on an activity devised by Spolin (1963), a group of three or more teachers are asked to imagine that they are in a school meeting in which they are discussing classroom management. In the course of the discussion each teacher has to handle different objects found in the immediate environment. The teachers do not plan what these objects will be but they have to incorporate each one within the discussion. The aim of this activity is to enable teachers to maximise their use of the surroundings and their ability to respond to what others say. Another example is in the form of an activity originally developed by Johnstone (1981). Teachers are asked to work in pairs, one of them narrating a story for 30 seconds, and then the other completing it in another 30 seconds. The second teacher has to somehow connect the disconnected material provided by the first teacher. Then the teachers switch roles. This activity encourages teachers to free-associate and identify connections they did not previously perceive. The use of such adapted activities in teacher education will probably better prepare pre-service teachers for the unpredictability and spontaneity of the classroom.

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## The Author



Daniel Xerri is the Joint Coordinator of the IATEFL Research SIG, a lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta, and the chairperson of the ELT Council within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta. A prolific author, his publications are the result of his research on creativity, literature in language teaching, and teacher education and development. Further details of his talks and publications can be found at [www.danielxerri.com](http://www.danielxerri.com)

Email: [daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt](mailto:daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt)

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