

# **Learning Space and Space for Learning: Adults' Intersubjective Experiences of Improvisation**

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Paper Presented at  
Adult Education Research Conference (AERC)  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, MN  
May 20, 2006

Keywords: Transformative Learning, Improvisation, Learning Space, Intersubjectivity, Whole-Person Learning, Phenomenology

**Abstract:** This phenomenological study asked the question, “What do adults experience learning improvisation?” The findings highlight the intersubjective, whole-person nature of learning and transformation, and of the learning space.

Improvisational games and creative dramatics have a long history of use in the classroom to engage learners, enliven subject matter (Bailin, 2001; O’Neill, 1995), and develop collaboration and communication competencies (Spolin, 1963, 1983). These strategies were largely developed for K-12 students, and most of the research on their use studies these populations and is outcome-based. The purpose of this qualitative study was to address this gap in the literature and to explore adults’ lived experience of learning improvisation, and specifically, to discover “What this social world means for the observed actor within this world and what did he/[she] mean by his [/her] acting within it?” (Brodersen, 1971, p. 7).

Three primary bodies of literature provided the context for the study: (a) adult, experiential and transformative learning, (b) improvisation in education, and (c) organizational improvisation. These areas have additional implications for training and development in organizational settings. A review of research in each of these domains revealed that studies on the use of improvisation in educational and organizational settings have focused primarily on antecedents and outcomes, with little attention to the actual experience of learning improvisation from the learner’s point of view.

Using methods informed by hermeneutic phenomenology, van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994), and others, eight co-researchers enrolled in a competence-based adult undergraduate program participated in several action-reflection cycles during and after their 10-week course. Data were collected using five reflective strategies: (a) post-improvisation in-class reflections, (b) weekly learning journal reflections and learning summaries, (c) follow-up interviews conducted within four months of the learning experience, (d) co-researchers’ reflections on the interview transcripts, and (e) researchers’ field notes.

The resulting data were analyzed using three qualitative methods: (a) thematization, (b) horizontal experience maps, and (c) thick descriptions.

The research findings are presented as four “views” of the learning experience: (a) individual experiences, (b) thematic amplification, (c) whole-person experiences, and (d) intersubjective experiences. The findings from these views are briefly summarized below.

*Individual experiences* of learning improvisation revealed the importance of each individual’s situatedness within the learning space (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and self-beliefs (Bandura, 1989) to the ways they made meaning of the experience. For co-researchers who described their experiences as transformative, these descriptions were contrasted with their earlier described self-beliefs. For example, one co-researcher, Elizabeth, began learning improvisation with her identity clearly informed by the self-belief “I don’t consider myself that creative.” She was armed with evidence from painful early childhood memories of being told she was too heavy to perform in a dance concert (she was told she would embarrass the family). She continued to develop this identity into adulthood. Over time, these self-beliefs became a self-fulfilling prophecy. She enacted this self-belief, in part, by avoiding situations that would put her in a position to be creative or spontaneous.

Elizabeth was well into middle age by the time she arrived for the first night of a class with the unsettling words “creativity” and “improvisation” in the title. She was not going to

suddenly express creativity simply because I or anyone else told her she was creative or introduced her to improvisation concepts and research findings; Elizabeth needed to *experience* herself as creative, and this took time, the freedom to be herself, and a slowly emerging trust and appreciation of herself and her learning colleagues. Elizabeth was not alone; co-researchers made meaning of the classroom and their experience learning improvisation in terms of their own life experience (current and historical), and in terms of what was already meaningful to them, with particular emphasis on their work life.

*Thematic amplification* revealed that co-researchers shared experiences of the work day spilling into the class experience, and of in-class transitions from work to classroom. Journal entries from Christina and Kevin exemplify the experience of the workday spilling into the learning. Christina wrote,

I am still so busy at work that today, when I showed up to class, I felt as if someone asked me how I was, I would break down and cry! I felt completely exhausted and in desperate need of an alcoholic beverage.

Kevin echoed, “This week started off as so many of my weeks do, lost in a distracting sea of chaos that is my mind.”

Co-researchers rarely stayed stuck in the experience they brought with them into the classroom and often made meaning of learning improvisation by contrasting how they felt arriving to class with how they felt as they began to improvise. Lisa described how it felt to improvise after putting in a 12-hour day:

I was surprised at how energized I became during the exercise. . . Stimulating the imagination is a transforming experience for me because all the garbage from the day is dissipating. Walking at the different paces and imagining various scenarios left me feeling aware and refreshed, as when I replenish my body with food or wake up and have a steaming cup of coffee and awaken to the day. It really did not take much time for me to feel the effect either. . . . I came in tired and worn out from work and started to come back to life and [feel] renewed—better than coffee and certainly more fun!

Co-researchers often made meaning of their improvisation experience by contrasting it with the structure, routine, and boredom they experienced at work. These experiences highlight one of the core meaning-making constructs of working adult students by showing how the work experience affected the learning space, and how learners made meaning of their improvisation experience by contrasting it with their work experience. In addition, co-researchers described various incidents of permission-giving, -taking, and -getting that were significant in their growing comfort and confidence in learning improvisation. It was not enough for me, as their instructor, to remind them that “there are no rules” in improvisation; co-researchers needed to see this demonstrated and to observe and experience positive feedback for exploring beyond their comfort zones.

*Whole-person experiences* of improvisation revealed dimensions of the actual lived experience of improvising. Analyzing three of van Manen’s four existentials (lived body, lived time, and spaciality), co-researchers described various experiences of being in- or out-of-sync with themselves and/or their fellow improvisers. They linked their experiences of “engagement” to shifts in their awareness and experience of their surroundings and time. Perhaps most significant was the fact that each of these dimensions of experience often brought with it two or three of the other dimensions. For example, co-researchers rarely described a kinesthetic experience without associating it with another feeling state or associated cognitive meaning-making. Christina’s description of her experience during the first week’s warm-up game was

characteristic of this phenomenon:

When we were walking around the room and Pamela was having us visualize certain things, such as running late to an interview, I started to feel completely in the moment. I started feeling nervous, and as a result, my stomach started hurting a bit (when I'm extremely nervous my stomach hurts) and I was also starting to sweat.

*Intersubjective experiences* (van Manen's fourth existential: human relationality) of learning improvisation revealed two key dimensions of the learning process: (a) the important role individuals play in each other's learning and (b) the intersubjective nature of improvisation and, by extension, the intersubjective dimension of transformation. The findings support the phenomenological conception that individual experience of the world is inextricably intersubjective "because we experience the world with and through others. Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human actions, and the totality of social artifacts and cultural objects is grounded in human activity" (Wilson, 2002, p. 3).

A key theme of the intersubjective learning experiences was co-researchers' shift from an almost exclusive focus on themselves to a growing awareness and appreciation of the group. This shift could be described as a transformation from "self-consciousness" to "self- and other-awareness." Elizabeth, who described significant discomfort early in her learning experience, reflected on the shift months after the class:

It was almost like children. When we're children, we don't think about what the other person is going to say or do. There, again, we go back to that being spontaneous; it's like okay for me to want to do that, but when we're adults we have that inhibition and even in the classroom. . . . Our second class, we didn't know each other too well at that point—we were just beginning to learn about each other—so the interaction, you know, from a first-time setting, that could be a little difficult. I mean, you know it's not like we're just raising our hand giving the answers; we're really interacting there.

These findings support and extend some of the current theorizing about adult and experiential learning; namely, learning space (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), whole-person learning, and intersubjective learning or learning-within-relationship (Yorks & Kasl, 2002). I will briefly explore these implications in the next sections.

### **Learning Space**

Recently, Kolb and Kolb (2005) foregrounded "learning space" in experiential learning theory (ELT). Lewin (as cited in Kolb & Kolb) originally developed the concept as an extension of field theory in psychology. In concert with his phenomenologist contemporaries, Lewin declared,

One of the basic characteristics of field theory in psychology, as I see it, is the demand that the field which influences an individual should be described not in objective physicalistic terms, but in the way that it exists for that person at that time. (p. 201)

The learning space of ELT "emphasizes that learning is not one universal process but a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate" (p. 200). Kolb, Lewin, and others provided strong support for the relationship between adults' whole-person experience and their ability to learn and make meaning of those experiences. In this latest extension of their work, Kolb and Kolb allowed for both many ways of knowing and for the multifaceted ways of experiencing the learning space and the experience of learning.

This space is not empty, but dynamic and charged with what one co-researcher described as an “energy force.” While this liminal space defies reduction, it offered co-researchers regular opportunities to experience, reflect upon, and describe the “way that it exist[ed] for [them] at that time” (Lewin, as cited in Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 201), as it elevated awareness, attention to and valuing of the learning space.

### **Whole Person Learning**

Kasl and Yorks extend Mezirow’s “habits of mind” to “habits of being” to include an embodied and not exclusively cognitive orientation to transformation (2002, p. 8). This is a welcome shift. The study findings offer another extension; Erik’s description of an improvisational walk home evokes his “awareness of being”:

One discovery that gave me great awareness tonight was when I left class, I followed my intuition which suggested a walk home instead of my usual race to catch a train and get home quickly. I walked and took some deep breaths and I became more aware of the scenery and people around me which helped me to feel more peaceful and gain clarity in my thoughts.

### **Intersubjectivity and Transformative Learning**

Much of the literature on adult and experiential learning places the individual at the center (Johnston & Usher, 1997; Taylor, 1998, 2000, 2001). This study foregrounds the intersubjective dimensions of learning improvisation. Co-researchers learned through others as they situated them within the learning space. They learned *in relation to* and *with* others as they directly experienced each other in improvised games and scenes, and as they connected outside of the classroom while sharing rides home, after-class drinks, and outside activities. Co-researchers learned over time in ways that allowed them to witness each other’s growing comfort, share in each other’s good humor, and support each other when they felt frustrated and vulnerable.

One of the unique aspects of the experience of learning improvisation is that the feedback is often immediate and public. Many co-researchers described breakthroughs or memorable experiences when they heard their classmates laughing or applauding in appreciation of their improvisation. As a group of improvisers returned to their seats, I often observed encouraging pats on the back and continued shared giggles or commentary. These experiences seemed to build as co-researchers became more attuned to each other’s experiences and less concerned with judgment. As participants became more comfortable in the shared learning space, they moved from an almost exclusive focus on their own success or failure to an interest and appreciation in the group’s success. This shift was particularly facilitative for some co-researchers. Starshine, who rarely spoke in class the first several weeks and had described herself as “shy” and declared “I get nervous in front of people” had a transformative experience improvising a scene halfway into the course. She reflected in her journal,

Improvisation was great! I have never done this sort of show before. I was pretty amazed how I completely came out of my shell for once. I was physically and mentally open for anything to come my way. I have to say I was pretty astonished with myself. The class enjoyed it and I felt that I wasn't judge by them at all. In my honest opinion, I believe that this night was a defining night for me. I felt it as I was leaving the class. It was a feeling of sureness, freedom, and being optimistic about me.

Starshine's description highlights another dimension of intersubjectivity; when co-researchers first became aware of what they were experiencing or expressing, and then realized they were not being judged for those experiences or expressions, they appeared to accept and appreciate themselves more fully. They also embraced the experiences and expressions of their fellow co-researchers. This intersubjective experience of awareness and acceptance appeared to be essential for those who described transformation.

### **Further Implications for Practice and Theory**

As with all of the emergent themes from co-researchers' experiences, it would be a mistake to translate their *descriptions* of learning and transformation into *prescriptions*. Much of the value of the learning experience emerged because the co-researchers and I did privilege certain experiences over others. Shifting the focus from learning improvisation to using improvisation for transformation would very likely constrain the meanings and experiences co-researchers made and had in the learning space. Such a shift would also orient learners to external referents of success, rather than to an attunement to the experience itself. Co-researchers' internal referents, descriptions of experience, and the meaning they assigned to their experiences constituted an essential dimension of the learning space.

This study makes a case for an additional research focus on the meaning individual adults make within the learning space, understanding the complexity of their experiences within the web of their own and others' learning space, and the intersubjective reality they construct. The findings also suggest that, while there are many ways to use improvisation in educational settings, educators can allow participants to gain greater value if the educators create space for learning and attune to the themes that were amplified through co-researchers' descriptions in this study. These themes, which are not likely to be exclusive to the experience of learning improvisation, were particularly heightened for this group of adults.

The intersubjective and public nature of improvisation experiences was not so much a dimension of the learning experience as it was *how* people learned. In their initial focus on the individual, the four lenses I used to view the experience of learning to improvise potentially distorted what I now believe is the essentially intersubjective nature of the entire learning experience. Individuals did not develop their improvisation skills, conceptual understanding, comfort and confidence, or have transformative experiences *separately* from their co-researchers, but did so "with and through" them (Wilson, 2002, p. 3).

Inviting adults to attune to the group process and their experience *within* the group supports an inclusive, relational approach. Yorks and Kasl (2002) have begun theorizing intersubjectivity in adult learning with their conception of "learning-within-relationship, a process in which persons strive to become engaged with both their own whole-person knowing and the whole-person knowing of their fellow learners" (p. 185). I would extend this conception to Kolb and Kolb's (2005) learning space and suggest that it is not only a "map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate" (p. 200), but also is a fundamentally intersubjective space in which adults engage each other and co-construct their experiences and meanings. The intersubjective nature of the learning space is inclusive of and symbiotically related to the experience, learning, and transformation of the individual.

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