

Improvising Learning Space: Making Room for Difference and Transformation

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Abstract: Eight adult undergraduates participated in a 10-week creativity course where they learned improvisation. Throughout the course and in interviews conducted after its conclusion, the participant co-researchers reflected on their experiences of the learning space they co-created with their colleagues and the room they made for transformation.

Improvisational games and creative dramatics have a long history of use in the classroom. Educators have used these strategies and other theater-in-education models to engage learners, enliven subject matter, and develop collaboration and communication competencies. Most of these strategies were originally developed for K-12 students (Spolin, 1986) and much of the research on the use of improvisation in learning has also focused on K-12 populations and is outcome-based. The few studies that do exist on improvisation in adult learning settings are also outcome-based. Missing from the literature are studies and practices that highlight the process of learning improvisation, and the dimensions of learning space that support transformation.

My own interest in the relationship between adults' experiences learning improvisation and transformative learning grew out of my years using improvisation, first as a theatre director during rehearsals, and later as a practitioner in organizational and educational settings. Over the years I began to see anecdotal evidence of transformative learning in a wide range of individuals who, as they were learning to improvise, began to experience and express themselves in ways that challenged and eventually shifted their self-beliefs (Bandura, 1977), and ways of thinking and being.

What, I wondered, were adults experiencing as they learned to improvise that gave them the room to venture beyond their comfort zones, and first become aware of, then accept and appreciate the differences emerging in themselves and their colleagues? This curiosity was the seed of my research. In this paper I will present some of my most significant findings and their implications for making room for difference in learning space.

Framework and Methodology

To explore my question, I conducted a phenomenological study of adults' experiences learning improvisation over a ten-week quarter in an adult undergraduate program. The eight class participants were invited to join the study as co-researchers and share their immediate post-improvisation in-class reflections, weekly reflective journal entries, and additional reflections on their learning experience during an individual interview three months after the last class. I then analyzed these findings for individual and amplified (shared) themes, as well as for the themes of

co-researchers' lived experiences of improvisation, and a final category that emerged during the data analysis, the intersubjective¹ and relational dimensions of learning improvisation.

Learning space was not the original focus of my research. I *thought* I was studying individual experiences of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), though soon discovered I was responding to Taylor and others' call for methodologies that study other ways of knowing and the intersubjective dimension of transformational learning (Johnston & Usher, 1997; Taylor, 2006). During my data analysis, it soon became clear that I could not separate individual's descriptions of transformation from the relational dimensions of the learning space. Before I expand on this, I will briefly provide some context for the concept of learning space.

Learning Space

One of the oldest descriptions of learning space can be found in the Japanese concept of "Ba," described by Nonaka and Konno as "a shared space for emerging relationships . . . [that] provides a platform for advancing individual and/or collective knowledge." They describe good *ba* as "superior relational situations where everyone brings energy to the others, enhancing creativity and supporting dynamic positive exchanges" (1998, pp. 40-1). Ba shifts the focus from individual learning and transformation to the shared relational experience. Yorks and Kasl (2002) highlight the intersubjectivity nature of learning space 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" (2002, p. 185). Much of collaborative inquiry theory and practice also foregrounds the learning space and the relational learning it fosters.

Palmer describes learning space as a place where paradoxes can be held because "teaching and learning require a higher degree of awareness than we ordinarily possess—and awareness is always heightened when we are caught in a creative tension. Paradox is another name for that tension, a way of holding opposites together that creates an electric charge that keeps us awake" (1998, p. 74). More recently, Kolb and Kolb highlight "learning space" in experiential learning theory (ELT). 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" (2005, p. 200). Findings from my study complement these descriptions of learning space, and centralize its social, relational and intersubjective dimensions. These dimensions made room for co-researchers to accept and appreciate their differences and, over time, experience significant transformation.

Making Room for Difference

Co-researchers described embodied awareness, acceptance and appreciation as key dimensions of their learning experience. Using a number of improvisation games and experiential learning exercises informed by Yorks and Kasl's whole person learning, and their extension of Mezirow's "habits of mind" to "habits of being" (2002), co-researchers first became more aware of their embodied experience of themselves, and increasingly accepting of themselves and their colleagues. In the non-judgmental learning space they consciously co-created, participants' acceptance was often accompanied by appreciation of themselves and their

¹ The phenomenological term "intersubjectivity" is used here in alignment with Wilson's conception that we experience the world "with and through others" (2002, p. 3). For readability I sometimes substitute the term "relationality."

colleagues, leading to increased comfort and confidence in the learning space and new lived experiences of themselves. These experiences often challenged the self-beliefs co-researchers named at the start of the quarter. For example, 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 and that 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.

Intersubjective/Relational Learning

The experience of learning improvisation is well suited to an exploration of both other ways of learning and the learning space itself. The highly intersubjective, relational nature of learning improvisation and the immediate and public feedback that accompany it are central to the experience of learning improvisation. Much of the literature on adult and transformative learning places the individual at the center (Johnston & Usher, 1997; Taylor, 2006). As co-researchers reflected on their experience it became increasingly clear that their descriptions of transformation were dynamically related to the highly intersubjective nature of the learning space.

As co-researchers situated themselves 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. The whole-person and relational dimensions of their learning experience were inseparable from their descriptions of transformative learning. The relational nature of the learning space, and the embodied awareness, and acceptance co-researchers experienced from each other also made room for the emergence and appreciation of individual differences. Within this space, three themes were amplified in co-researchers’ descriptions, *Freedom from Judgment*, *Permission-giving*, *-taking*, and *-getting*, and a shift from “*self-consciousness*” to “*self- and other-awareness*.”

Freedom from Judgment. The concept that “there are no rules in improvisation” was central to co-researchers experience of the learning space, complemented by descriptions of “freedom from judgment.” Improvising free from others’ or their own judgment was significant and seemed, for some, to facilitate the emergence of a new authorship of self. When we met for our interview, Lisa described an additional dimension of the “no rules” theme:

Sometimes I thought, “Oh, I don't know how I'm gonna...how is this gonna work?” And just kind of go with it, and all of a sudden it's working. And it's like, oh, cool. You know, “Oh, there's no right or wrong, so okay!” It's just, you know, such a wonderful feeling.

The transition from “how is this gonna work?” to “just kind of go with it, and all of a sudden it's working” was a distinct shift from a tentative, cognitive, planning-orientation to action, to confident and spontaneous action. Starshine described a similar experience when she made a conscious choice:

not be intimidated, not be afraid to you know, take a step forward. To do whatever exercises you ask us to do. It's like okay, what the hell? I'm going to go do it. I'm going to do it, the hell with it. You know? And afterwards I felt good about myself, like okay, see it wasn't that bad.

Jason's experience of “no rules” extended to other dimensions of the class. He reflected on the diversity in the class and his appreciation for the wide range of viewpoints and experiences people shared:

There was so, you know, open table, like round table discussion wise, I mean, at no time were we not allowed to go, “Hey, what about this? What about that.” And in fact it was so free form like that, even while we're talking about something, that communication between everybody and all, like the melding of everyone's different viewpoints and perceptions, that was key. Just because it reminds you that not everyone thinks the same way you do. And people just see things in a way you would never even think of. And it's refreshing to know that, you know, it doesn't have to be seen in one light, you know? It doesn't have to be taken just like that. So that's why I was excited just to see what is somebody gonna say next. You know?

As co-researchers extended “there are no rules in improvisation” to other dimensions of the learning space, they experienced more freedom from judgment. This space enabled them to become increasingly aware and accepting of their differences, and to appreciate the individual contributions each brought to the learning experience.

Permission-giving, -taking, and -getting. Co-researchers also described various incidents of permission-giving, -taking, and -getting that facilitated 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 by their colleagues and to observe and experience positive feedback for exploring beyond their comfort zones.

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 judged 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.

From self-consciousness" to "self- and other-awareness." This third theme describes an important shift that also made room for transformation. During our interview I asked Lisa, who had earlier described her experience as like "being let out of a cage," if she could tell me what else stood out for her as she reflected her learning experience she traversed almost the entire class, appreciating the growth and connection she felt with each individual and the group as a whole:

I don't know, I was just amazed at how everyone...Erik just blew me out of the water. He's just amazing. His sense of humor and playfulness was refreshing and was hidden from us during our first class together. I get excited to witness such growth in a person. And then, well, Starshine, she joined Toastmasters. And she was like Miss Shy of the Universe, and she forced herself to come to your class, to get out of her shell. Now she's in Toastmasters. She's going to be an officer. I mean, it's just the transformations, you know. ... It's just amazing. I just loved it. I just loved it. And Christina, too. She is no longer the shy, reticent little girl. She's now speaking up at work, and, oh yes, she has really developed. 'Cause we'll drive together if we have class, and then I'll drive her home. It's on my way home. So I still see her— And she has, like it's still working. She keeps blossoming. She keeps going, "Okay, what did we do in class?" And she uses it when she's gotta do something that's out...that she wants to hide in the corner. Instead, "No, I'm gonna do this." And she'll think about, you know, how to get out of her shell. "If I did it in class, I can do this." And she's been successful, you know. Everyone's in a different spot, you know.

Lisa's descriptions of the changes in her colleagues and the group as a whole represent a significant shift from her relatively singular focus on her own success at the beginning of the course. This shift from initial self-consciousness to an appreciative awareness of herself and others was shared by many of the co-researchers and appeared to contribute to the safety and trust they enjoyed. It also made room for co-researchers to experiment outside of their comfort zone, giving them permission to experience themselves enacting new capacities, for which they also received positive feedback from the group. This set in motion a cycle that increased their confidence and reinforced their willingness to take risks in the learning space.

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 not privilege certain experiences over others. Shifting the focus from learning improvisation to using improvisation for transformation would very likely constrain the meanings co-researchers made and experiences they 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 they create space for learning and attune to the themes that were amplified through co-researchers' descriptions in this study.

The intersubjective and public nature of improvisation experiences was not so much a dimension of the learning experience as it was *how* people learned. Inviting adults to attune to the group process and their experience *within* the group supports an inclusive, relational approach. 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).

Based on my findings I would extend Yorks and Kasl's conception of "learning-within-relationship" (2002) to Kolb and Kolb's (2005) description of 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" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200), but a fundamentally relational space in which adults engage with each other and co-construct their experiences and meanings. The relational character of the learning space is inclusive and by its very nature makes room for difference. When all participants in the learning space attune to its relational dimensions they make room for the whole-person experience, learning, and transformation of the individual.

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