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Improvisational Theater as a Tool for Enhancing Cooperation in Academic Libraries

Anthony Stamatoplos

When an audience watches improvisers setting each other up with information, supporting each other's ideas, and furthering the scenes, they see true art in action.

—Charna Halpern, et al.¹

It is not uncommon for an audience member to be in awe of a professional improvised performance. They may even find it difficult to believe the performers really created a piece of music or a theatrical scene spontaneously before their eyes. What the audience has witnessed is the remarkable power of collaboration. Generally, they are unaware of the skills and processes these performers use instinctively.

Arie Y. Lewin notes that improvisation "...has always been recognized in organization theory but it was treated as an organization dysfunction: an unintended outcome or as an organization design failure."² This has changed, as interest in improvisation grows among organizational theorists and researchers who relate group dynamics found in improvising groups to creativity, innovation, and flexibility in organizations.

The general idea of improvisation in libraries is not new. As in other organizations, however, the mention of improvisation in library contexts can evoke

negative images for some people. One reason for this can be certain preconceptions or erroneous conceptualizations of improvisation. Some view improvisation as something one resorts to only in dire circumstances, or because they lack requisite skills, knowledge, or resources. This perception also exists in other types of organizations, particularly those with hierarchical structures and management styles.

This paper examines the concept of improvisation and suggests that academic libraries: 1) move beyond the idea of improvisation as merely a useful metaphor; 2) learn from improvisation in non-library organizations; 3) include improvisation as a practical tool for fostering cooperation and teamwork; and 4) institute formal staff development in certain skills used by theatrical improvisers.

Improvisation and Improvisational Theater

The most familiar contexts of improvisation are jazz, theater, and sports. To consider improvisation in academic libraries, one should first understand the characteristics and fundamental processes of improvisation. Basically, improvisation is "the spontaneous and creative process of attempting to achieve an ob-

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jective in a new way.”³ The dimensions of *spontaneity* and *creativity* have drawn interest of those who study and promote similar traits in businesses and other organizations. Improvisation also implies skills of *flexibility* and *intuition*, which organizations also find valuable.⁴

Principles and lessons from improvisational theater have been particularly informative for those who study improvisational behavior in organizations. One can begin to appreciate the practical value of improvisation for organizations by examining improvisational theater processes and how actors use them to work and create collaboratively. One way to think about improvisational theater is to contrast it with conventional theater, such as a play. In scripted theater, actors perform plays that are already written and which they have rehearsed under the guidance of directors. Sets, props, and costumes are prepared to support the productions. Virtually everything is planned and practiced ahead, and one hopes, executed according to plan.

In contrast, improvisational theater has no script and no memorized lines or actions. Actors “write” and perform scenes simultaneously. They do so spontaneously and collaboratively. They create and develop their characters in the same manner. Actors often mime or otherwise suggest aspects of the environment, which the audience experiences through their shared imagination.

A common misconception is that “anything goes” in improvisation. For some, to suggest an improvisational approach implies anarchy. Such assumptions obscure understanding and can be prejudicial. The fact is: “Improvisation, although it involves spontaneity and extemporizing, doesn’t mean that there is a total lack of structure.”⁵ Karl E. Weick reminds his readers that jazz great Charles Mingus once explained that “you can’t improvise on nothing; you’ve gotta improvise on something.”⁶ Structure is important in improvisation, though it may not be obvious to an audience. Structure provides a framework for improvisation.

Principles of Improvisation

Stated simply, “True improvisation is getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning.”⁷ But doing so is not always easy, and there is much more to it. Psychologist and educator Keith Sawyer has studied improvisation for several years. He describes improvisational theater as “improvised dia-

logue,” in which actors essentially take turns making offers and responses. An offer is any proposed addition to the scene, such as an action or line of dialogue. Other actors respond to an offer in a way that accepts it and then enhances it.⁸ Overall, improvising actors work according to principles that embody those skills that facilitate collaborative creation of scenes.

An essential principle of improvisation is *agreement*. Improvisers often refer to the “yes, and...” rule: actors accept and add to the ideas of others. Following this principle, “...one step at a time, each player provides a building block, until they have easily, painlessly, constructed a scene.”⁹ “The acceptance of each other’s ideas brings the players together, and engenders a ‘group mind’.”¹⁰

A corollary to “yes, and...” is the principle of “no denial.” Actors should not deny, negate, or reject offers made by others in a scene. Sawyer summarizes this rule as follows: “Everything that is introduced by an actor must be fully embraced and accepted by the other actors on stage.”¹¹ “Denying the reality that is created on stage ends the progression of the scene, and destroys any chance of achieving a group consciousness.”¹² Conversely, following the principle of agreement has powerful results and contributes to successful and interesting theater. The esteemed improviser and teacher Keith Johnstone notes that, “The actor who will accept anything that happens seems supernatural; it’s the most marvelous thing about improvisation: you are suddenly in contact with people who are unbounded, whose imagination seems to function without limit.”¹³

Another key principle of theatrical improvisation is *awareness* or *attentiveness*. This refers to listening and focusing on what is happening at the moment. Improvisers often refer to this as being or staying “in-the-moment.” Good improvisers are good listeners. Viola Spolin explains that, “The actor in improvisational theater must listen to his fellow actor and hear everything he says if he is to improvise a scene. He must look and see everything that is going on. This is the only way players can play the same game together.”¹⁴

Improvised performances thrive on *making connections*. Actors continually perceive associations and reincorporate elements into scenes. The actor must, “...store the information in the back of his mind, not relying on it too heavily, but keeping it handy so he can pull it out when something in the scene triggers

the connection,” at which time, “...the player recycles the thought or action.”¹⁵ They sometimes do this in subtle ways that allow the audience make the connections themselves.

Another improvisation rule is *show, don't tell*, referring to a mistake that actors can make by “talking about doing something instead of doing it.”¹⁶ In his analysis of improvisation principles, Sawyer explains, “The emphasis on physical activity in preference to explicit talking is reflected in the value placed on physicalization—turning goals, mental states, or properties of the scene into physical activity.”¹⁷ In improvisational theater, actors “...must make *active* choices, rather than passive ones, and then follow through on their ideas.”¹⁸ This is vital for effective and believable performances. “Scenes are much more interesting when the idea is seen, rather than *talked about*.”¹⁹

Though agreement is a foundation of improvisation, many improvisers say that without *trust* it does not succeed. Improvisers learn to trust themselves, their fellow actors, the group mind, and the process itself. “When an improviser lets go and trusts his fellow performers, it's a wonderful, liberating experience that stems from group support.”²⁰

Improvisation in Libraries

Relatively few authors have given serious consideration to improvisation in libraries. Jacqueline Donaldson Doyle was one of the first to apply the lens of improvisation to libraries. She suggests using improvisation as a metaphor to help identify ways libraries can adapt to change.²¹ In particular, Doyle relates the element of agreement to librarianship. She also compares other key elements and goals of improvisational theater to those of health sciences librarianship, identifying some telling similarities: “As in Improvisational theater, courage, creativity, and the ability to respond effectively and quickly are attributes that will enable librarians to thrive in the new information environment, whether it be in a clinical, academic, or research setting.”²²

Felix T. Chu presents the most significant treatment of improvisation in the LIS literature. He gives first-hand accounts of improvisational processes used successfully in library settings.²³ Chu views improvisation in the context of coping with change and uncertainty: “In the library world, improvisation occurs in many areas when the environment changes in unexpected or ill-understood directions.”²⁴ He further

notes that, “...the ability to improvise hinges on mastery of basic components.”²⁵ Improvisation serves to “...meet needs as they arise and solutions are crafted within the bounds of available resources.”²⁶ He suggests improvisation in libraries, such as in reference work, as a possible frame of analysis for research. Chu raises key questions: “...how does this improvisation take place...are there ‘rules of thumb’ that may be articulated and learned?”²⁷

Though such discussions are enlightening, the literature does not evidence their influence in LIS theory and practice. And Chu's questions have yet to be addressed adequately. To a limited extent, our profession appears to recognize the occurrence and potential value of improvisation. Those who consider it do so either casually, with general characterizations, or focus on its value as a metaphor. They do not, however, explore in depth the individual and organizational traits and processes related to improvisation, and do not suggest any practical means of achieving them.

Organizational Improvisation and Academic Libraries

It is not surprising that the improvisation model is undeveloped in academic librarianship. It may not be sufficiently prominent in familiar literature or in popular culture to have been noticed and borrowed. Conceptualization and metaphorical analysis using improvisation is, however, established in business and organizational studies.²⁸ Researchers have more recently begun empirical work.²⁹ Karl E. Weick observes: “The idea of improvisation is important for organizational theory because it gathers together compactly and vividly a set of explanations suggesting that to understand organization is to understand organizing.”³⁰ One can look to organizational improvisation to help consider improvisation in academic libraries and its potential role in fostering cooperation and teamwork.

There is an abundance of literature on or related to organizational improvisation. Cunha, et al provides a good, but dated, discussion of organizational improvisation and a contextual overview and its literature.³¹ An early proponent of using the improvisation lens to study organizations was psychologist and organizational theorist Karl E. Weick. Especially informative to the academic library community is Weick's chapter on organizational design, in which he compares it to theatrical improvisation.³² He challenges the common

use of architectural design as a metaphor for organizational design and change, arguing that improvisation serves as a more suitable metaphor or model. He contrasts the architecture model's focus on structure with improvisation's focus on process. For Weick, improvisation is a way to move from a static view to a dynamic view of organizational design.³³ "Design, viewed from the perspective of improvisation, is more emergent, more continuous, more filled with surprise, more difficult to control, more tied to the content of action, and more affected by what people pay attention to than are the designs implied by architecture."³⁴ In this view, the process of design is driven by *attention* rather than *intention*.

Weick points out that "Improvisation is largely an act of interpretation rather than an act of decision making. People who improvise have to make sense of unexpected events that emerge, which means they are more concerned with interpreting what has happened than with deciding what will happen."³⁵ "...action is decision-*interpreted*, not decision-driven."³⁶ Since improvisation "...is responsive to ongoing change in the organization and the environment," it has an advantage over standardization.³⁷ "...good designs are those designs that incorporate the intuiting, experimenting, and arguing that are prominent in improvisation....To design is to notice sequences of actions that are improvements, call attention to them, label them, repeat them, disseminate them, and legitimize them."³⁸

For a more practical sense of improvisation in academic libraries, consider this integrated definition of organizational improvisation: "...the conception of action as it unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources."³⁹ To develop and promote organizational improvisation, certain conditions must be present: 1) an experimental culture, 2) a minimal structure, and 3) a low procedural memory.⁴⁰

Academic libraries have tried to develop new organizational structures and management approaches that are more suitable for changing environments. Over the last several years, there have been numerous variants of organizational structures that aim to promote efficiency and improve work environments. A familiar example is the team-based organization in academic libraries. But, as Barbara Fister and Kathie Martin point out, "Organizational structures don't in themselves change human behavior."⁴¹ They assert

that, "...libraries are badly in need of a new model for self-organization, one that makes the most of its members' talents, invites and nurtures creativity, allows dynamic responses to an always-changing environment, rewarding growth without requiring talented workers to go elsewhere for rewards."⁴² This seems almost an ideal picture of library organization.

Fister and Martin also point out that, regardless of hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational structures, many libraries find ways to function collegially anyway. "They simply ignore the hierarchy, find workarounds, or create unofficial structures that work better—a marketplace of ideas that is more or less a functional black market....Our culture is already collaborative and responsive to our users."⁴³ She seems to be describing improvisation.

Developing Improvisation in the Library

How does an academic library, or any organization, support and nurture improvisation? Of course, there should be an organizational structure that supports it and a culture that values, encourages, and rewards it. But we cannot do this superficially. Sawyer notes how the corporate world has discovered collaboration: "Businesses everywhere are moving to team organizations, distributed leadership, and collaboration." But, "...the managers who have embraced the power of collaboration have largely taken a black-box approach: They look at overall team characteristics—such as members' personality traits—instead of investigating what goes on inside the box."⁴⁴ Inside the box are the interactional dynamics and improvisational processes that are the subject of Sawyer's research.

At some point, your library may want to consider systematically ways that each of the principles of improvisation relate to the organization. This might be in preparation for more intentional work at a later time. You also can follow the example of professional improvisers: "What professional actors do to be better improvisers is to learn techniques, games, and principles that help them focus in the moment and to embrace the moment of collective creation."⁴⁵ Some organizational theorists suggest the use of workshops to train staff in improvisation skills.⁴⁶ Businesses that want to promote improvisation sometimes work with local improvisational theater groups to provide customized improvisation workshops for their staff.⁴⁷

The library also can provide staff development in improvisation techniques, along with opportuni-

ties to practice them. Crossan describes improvisation workshops as the bridge between theory and practice.⁴⁸ Many cities have at least one professional improvisational theater company or group. Some of these groups have corporate training programs. Others might be willing to develop workshops.

What, specifically, should an academic library improvisation workshop look like? Corporate training workshops often consist of various exercises, activities, and games that are selected to focus on particular needs within an organization. While there may be some common needs and interests among academic libraries, the most appropriate approach would be to communicate and work with the facilitators prior to a session to assure that the library's needs are addressed. Planning sessions might include identifying needs and matching them with exercises and activities that will address them. You also should give some consideration to follow-up.

Corporate workshop participants often find their session engaging, and even fun, since it seems more like play than most conventional staff development activities. One of the roles of facilitators can be to maintain a suitable balance of play and learning, though it can be difficult to separate them. Perhaps with some effort and support, your organization can become more improvisational, and at times you will see *true art in action* where you work.

Notes

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8. R. Keith Sawyer, *Improvised Dialogues: Emergence and Creativity in Conversation* (Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 2003): 67-72.
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11. Sawyer, *Improvised Dialogues*, 96.
12. Halpern, Close, and Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*, 48.
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14. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963): 169.
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27. *Ibid.*, 3.
28. For example, see Karl E. Weick, "Organized Improvisation: 20 Years of Organizing," *Communication Studies* 40, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 241-8; Karl E. Weick, "Organizational Redesign as Improvisation," in *Organizational Change and Redesign: Ideas and Insights for Improving Performance*, eds. George P. Huber and William H. Glick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 346-79; Weick, "Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Studies"; Vera and Crossan, "Theatrical Improvisation."
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36. Ibid., 364.
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