

# TEACHING MANAGEMENT AS JAZZIN': IMPROVISATION IN THE MANAGEMENT CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*We explore the metaphor of the management classroom as a site for improvisation. Drawing upon descriptions of effective jazz improvisation, we describe six practices of jazz soloists and illustrate them with improvisational teaching analogues. The underlying structure of improvisational teaching, the role of swing, and the need to edit one's improvisational teaching and to "think ahead" are all discussed. We suggest how thinking of one's students as an accompanying ensemble and fellow soloists can be fruitful.*

## INTRODUCTION

As we have sought ways to keep our classroom lives engaging for us as teachers and for our students, we have looked to our avocations for potential sources of insight into the teaching and learning process. Simultaneously, we have often jointly speculated how we might become educators who effectively interweave our avocations with our identities as teachers. Our musings and our shared fascination with and love for jazz music have led us to consider jazz improvisation as a metaphor for teaching.

Jazz soloists engage audiences by improvising spontaneous, unrehearsed, not-written-down performances. Teachers in higher education are increasingly expected to engage students in active learning. Those teachers who are able to improvise – and respond to the emergent dynamics of the classroom – are more able to foster such student engagement. There are, we believe, compelling parallels between the foundations and practices of jazz improvisation and the effective facilitation of the learning of an ensemble of students.

Let us begin to illustrate some of these parallels with the help of a typical jazz performance, pianist Renee Rosnes' recording of the well-known song, "Someday My Prince Will Come." The performing group contains three instruments: piano, bass and drums. The song is 32 bars long. During the course of the performance, which lasts about four minutes, the group will have played the song through five times. Each play-through is known as a chorus. In the first and last choruses, Rosnes plays the melody of the tune faithfully on the piano, with bass and drums in accompaniment. This statement of the tune's melody is known as the "head." During the second, third and fourth choruses, improvisation takes place. The second chorus consists of a solo by the bass player, while the pianist solos during the third and fourth choruses. While improvisation is occurring, the underlying accompaniment, or "chord changes", remain the same as that of the original tune. Atop this familiar bed of chords, the soloist improvises new melodies.

At the very start, before the group launches into the tune for the first time, they play an 8-bar introduction during which the bass lays down a steady pulse and the piano plays a few warm-up introductory figures. Then, the above-mentioned five choruses follow. During the entire performance, all three players employ syncopation, which means that they place accents on normally unaccented beats. To the ears of the listener, this results in a note or chord arriving sometimes later than expected, and sometimes earlier. This creates a sense of surprise. Finally, the performance contains a quality known in jazz as “swing,” which means that it possesses, along with a steady pulse, a surging momentum – a steady propulsive force that tugs the music forward, and along with it, the audience.

In this paper, we explore the metaphor of a management instructor as jazz improviser. Drawing upon Gridley’s descriptions of effective jazz solos (1994) and Berliner’s (1994) ethnomusicology of jazz improvisation, we develop parallels between jazz playing and soloing such as that described above and our teaching. Six practices of jazz soloists that are described by Gridley form the basis of our teaching-as-improvisation metaphor. First, we discuss the importance of rooting improvisational teaching in an underlying structure for the class that is similar to a jazz tune’s chord structure. The second practice we explore is the importance of developing ideas and processes that are compatible with that underlying structure. Third, we illustrate how swing and syncopation provide momentum and energy to a jazz performance – and can likewise energize students in an effective learning environment. The fourth and fifth practices we highlight are the benefits of editing one’s improvisations and “thinking ahead,” respectively. Sixth, we comment upon how thinking in terms of this metaphor, has enhanced our appreciation of how our students can be a supporting ensemble acting as accompanists and sometime soloists who further stimulate improvisational teaching and mutual learning. We also discuss of the cycle of precomposition and improvisation that characterizes much of jazz and that we have come to see reflected in our thinking about our classroom teaching. Finally, we briefly mention some downsides to improvisational teaching. Throughout, our examples emphasize the improvisational teaching of operations management and organizational studies courses.

## **PRACTICE #1: REMEMBER THE CHORD CHANGES**

As we mentioned above, the chord changes of a jazz arrangement provide an underlying structure which grounds performers’ improvisations and renders them more accessible to listeners than they otherwise might be. Similarly, it is useful to formulate, as a preparation for improvisation in the classroom, an underpinning structure for both the course and any particular class session. In an undergraduate production/operations management course, we might allocate five hours to the topic of facilities layout, working from an estimate that it might take four hours to cover the topic using a traditional approach that made little or no use of classroom improvisation. The extra hour would allow for exploration of unforeseen areas of inquiry in the classroom. In the context of a particular classroom session, we may identify the structure to be, for example: an introduction to three common layout models (product-, process- and cellular); and an examination of the issues of workflow, capital and labor intensivities, required skill levels

and throughput time in each of the three models. This structure would serve an analogous function to the underlying “chord changes” of a jazz performance.

Springing from the above example, we would attempt to stimulate discussion in several potential directions, depending upon the willingness and interest of the class to explore these directions. For example, in the facilities layout session above, discussion in a past class session led from capital intensiveness of a product layout to equipment inflexibility, equipment investment levels, high entry and exit barriers, financial justification of expensive specialized machinery, and the critical importance of machine utilization levels, concluding by resurrecting a debate of efficiency- and effectiveness-based performance measures.

In another section of the same course, the discussion took seed, as before, in the capital intensiveness of the process, but then led into the resulting low labor intensiveness of those processes, required level of employee skill, employee authority and responsibility in quality control decision-making, reliance on final inspections, levels of scrap and rework costs, long throughput times, and thus poor effectiveness in quick response to customers. Curiously, in a surprise typical of improvisation, the discussion ended just as it had in the other section, with a contrasting of effectiveness- and efficiency-based measures. The presence of the underlying structure (contrasting the three layout models on a certain set of criteria) allowed a home base from which to depart on journeys to new ports of call over the course of the class session.

For sessions about motivation in an organizational behavior or principles of management course, we might assume that no more than three class sessions would be devoted to the topic. Within that parameter, we might plan to devote a majority of time to discussion of process theories of motivation, in particular equity and expectancy theories. Given those priorities, or primary chord structure, we would also expect to refer to the range of factors which might influence employee performance, the distinction between content and process theories, and the value of combining concepts from different content and process perspectives to develop an integrated view of motivation. A specific session in an OB course might focus on the key variables and predictions of equity theory. We have found that clarifying such an underlying structure can help to focus both our teaching activities and the attention of our students.

Berliner (p. 73) points out that many a novice jazz musician has been dispatched unceremoniously from the bandstand for not “knowing the chords”. A working mastery of fundamental harmonic principles is especially important in jazz improvisation because of the recurring use of harmonic and melodic devices across all the twelve “keys” or tonalities. So, a shared knowledge of harmony allows musicians to draw from a storehouse of devices and apply them to a variety of pieces. This would not be possible if the musician was unfamiliar with the harmony (chord changes) of the tune he was playing. Knowing the “changes” of a tune is therefore a prerequisite for improvisation to occur upon the tune. While playing a tune and improvising on it by ear alone is not uncommon, sooner or later, it results in missteps, confusion and often embarrassment, especially for the inexperienced musician.

It is the teacher’s responsibility to establish and clearly communicate the “chord changes,” or underlying structure, of each class session. Often, the “changes” will be based upon pre-assigned readings (e.g., from the text, instructor-prepared notes, articles, etc) that students will be expected to be familiar with, going into the class session. It has

been our experience that the degree of preparedness of our students with these pre-assigned readings is a major factor in the success or failure of improvisation-based teaching approaches in the classroom. Study questions for students to consider while they complete assigned reading may help to introduce students to the changes. Sometimes at the beginning of a session we will introduce an outline of our treatment of a topic to communicate, at least in part, the changes. Often quite spontaneously, we will, at the end of a class session, leave students with a question to consider or a kind of personal experience to bring to class to discuss in the next session. For instance, in anticipation of an upcoming discussion of equity theory, we might ask students to come to class prepared to talk about a discussion about fairness on their jobs in which they have participated.

## **PRACTICE #2: CREATE PHRASES COMPATIBLE WITH THE CHORD CHANGES**

One of Gridley's descriptions of successful improvisers is that they try to "create phrases compatible with the chord changes" (page 28). Again, we see how fundamental the underlying structure of the composition is to improvisational jazz. As we noted above, there are multiple possible sources of such changes that provide a basic and shared structure for a class session. In teaching, the phrases created by the improviser can be matters of the content to emphasize or in the processes that an instructor uses to facilitate learning of that content. For instance, to manage the content focus, an improvising teacher might ask students to respond to a list of trigger questions or to complete tasks that relate to the topic of the session and are rooted in assigned reading or linked to a session outline. An improvising teacher might create a compatible phrase by making an on-the-spot decision to use a small group process for discussion in order to sustain the swing of a session. At another time, because she wants to generate quick participation and individual accountability, she might give students some individual reflection time and then simply call on individual students in some announced order. The key to this principle of effective improvisation is that the teacher introduces elements that fit the underlying structure of the session. This means, of course, that the teacher must consistently remain cognizant of that structure – the content, process and feel of the session.

It also means that the teacher will find herself choosing not to play potential "phrases" which might take the session too far from its "chord changes." When a student question threatens to take the session in a direction that will depart from the underlying structure, the teacher must be willing either to reframe the question such that responding to it does fit within the structure or to choose not to address the question within that session. In addition, a teacher must be willing to reject a process that is not synchronous with the structure of the session.

Again, in courses in principles of management, organizational behavior or human resource management, we will often teach equity theory as a way of understanding workplace motivation. A central concept in equity theory is a person's perception of the ratio of his or her outcomes from doing the job to what he or she contributes or puts into the job. As an instructor, one can invite students to improvise by listing factors that they consider when evaluating whether they are being treated fairly on the job. An

improvising instructor might record those factors so that all students can see them in two columns sorted as work outcomes or inputs, but without labeling the columns. Inevitably, some items fit into both categories. For example, some students think taking a less popular or more onerous work schedule is an input that merits special reward. But one's work schedule can also be an outcome/reward for good performance. Thus, the teacher may have a chance to reframe a student's solo to show how the phrase fits the chord changes.

In a further example of using phrases that are compatible with the changes when discussing equity theory, we have observed that one might choose to resist the temptation, in the context of a discussion of motivation, to note that equity is only one norm that might inform judgments of justice. While a professor might note that rewards can be allocated on the basis of equality or need, rather than equity, doing so could be seen as a failure to play within the structure – the chord changes – of equity theory. This illustration is also consistent with a principle we address later: edit your work as a soloist.

It is a truism that two musical improvisations upon the same piece by two different ensembles may vary markedly in terms of complexity, adventurousness, sophistication, and richness. One notable factor that significantly influences the degree of success of improvisatory teaching is the level of sophistication of the students in the class. In a senior-level elective on quality management, we held students responsible for reading about a particular topic or chapter in advance of each session and tested them by means of a quick “lightning quiz” at the start of class. For the rest of the class session, the reading provided a backdrop to ignite discussions on some aspects of the topic or chapter at hand. We almost never determined all these discussion ignition points in advance, relying instead on the students to uncover and bring to light points of interest during the class session, occasionally aided by the catalyzing intervention of the Socratic method.

Not every student in the classroom has to possess a high level of sophistication and ability in order for fruitful improvisations to occur. Sometimes, the presence of just one or two students who fall into that category can be sufficient to significantly enhance the efficacy of improvisation and enhance learning. The quality management course mentioned above had one such student with a wealth of quality-related work experience whose comments and insights consistently provided an inexhaustible source of discussion seeds that resulted in an unforeseen depth to the examination of the issues at hand. Each such seed had the potential to spark an improvisationally-driven line of inquiry. It is worth noting that our students often have more experience with organizational topics than they recognize. We have learned to help students learn compatible phrases by giving them a chance to author their own personal cases of organizational life so that they come to value that experience more highly. Sometimes it is as simple as asking students briefly describe an example of a phenomenon that is related to a concept or theory we are discussing, such as “Describe your preparation for our most recent quiz or exam.” Having such a story to tell makes it possible for students to “play phrases” that are compatible with a discussion of the expectancy, instrumentality and valence variables in expectancy theory. Alternatively, we sometimes use personal case writing assignments in which students compose longer written descriptions of their experiences with specific employment or organizational processes. These approaches help students find phrases that are compatible with the chord changes and increase the chances that members of the

ensemble will play solos which increase engagement and that the course makes music that is more relevant to students' immediate experiences.

One consequence of the above is the risk (even likelihood) that not every topic and sub-topic in the assigned chapter will be discussed in class. In a traditionally pre-scripted, unimprovisational approach, this risk is much reduced or even eliminated. A musical analogy might be the emergence of modal jazz, most famously on Miles Davis's 1959 album *Kind Of Blue*. Rather than employing pieces that are dense with frequent chord changes (as are the norm in swing and bebop-based jazz), modal jazz often features compositions that contain very few chords. In addition, each chord tends to last for several measures. An important consequence of such modal (the terms "mode" and "chord" are nearly synonymous) playing is that it frees up musicians to concentrate on examining a particular chord in rewarding depth for several measures before needing to move on to the next chord.

Analogously, in our classroom, the topics that come up for discussion can be treated with some depth and richness, even though breadth (in terms of touching on every single sub-topic within the topic area) may need to be sacrificed to do so. For instance, the inventory management topic in our operations course has evolved over time and now includes fewer detailed explorations of alternative economic order quantity models. Instead, this reduced breadth has made possible a more careful and substantive treatment of such areas as the ABC system of inventory classification, cycle counting, inventory performance measures, and vendor-managed inventory, all of which had previously received relatively cursory attention because there were simply too many topic areas jostling for space within the time allotted for coverage of inventory management.

### **PRACTICE #3: SWING**

In jazz, the all-important feeling of "swing" is characterized by a steady tempo, a sense of group cohesion, and an energy and spirit. Swing provides a momentum to the performance, giving it a rhythmic tug that carries the ensemble forward. A performance does not necessarily have to be up-tempo and fast in order to swing. Slower-tempo tunes ("ballads") can swing too, as jazz pianist/arranger Alan Broadbent has pointed out, crediting pioneer Bill Evans with that revelation. Syncopation, which means accenting "weak" beats rather than "strong" ones thus subverting expectation and playing slightly behind the beat, also contributes to the sense of swing. Gridley (1994) notes that a key element of the impact of syncopation is 'upset' or tension it creates when we expect to hear one rhythmic pattern and instead experience the syncopation (page 6). That violation of our expectation can be stimulating.

A classroom session swings by the presence of momentum and energy, which help foster a sense of engagement. Syncopation has its analogue in consciously employing an element of "surprise" in the classroom. This might be achieved by varying the mode of presentation, for example, by choosing and alternating between using the blackboard, slides, and throwing questions out directly to students. We often create impromptu in-class group assignments, depending on a turn a class discussion might have taken. For example, a discussion of mass production and *The Machine That Changed The World* (Womack, Jones and Roos, 1991), led to the beginnings of a debate on standardization. Instead of continuing with the debate in the large-class format, we

divided the class into small groups and assigned them the separate tasks of cataloging the benefits and drawbacks of product and process standardization. We had each group choose someone who would record its work on a transparency. Each group was given ten minutes to prepare its points, and then we requested that the person sitting to the right of the recorder present the group's work to the class. We mention this example to point out the element of *unpredictability* that can be incorporated into a classroom. This element of chance, integral to improvisation, prevents the ensemble from settling comfortably into pre-determined patterns and roles, thus fostering an active and alert spirit in the classroom.

Another approach to introducing such tension via surprise in the classroom we have learned to use is occasionally to call on each student sequentially, based on where she is sitting. In our explorations of equity theory, we often asks students to contribute to collective lists of what employees perceive to be salient inputs and outcomes by simply starting with the student in one corner of the room and proceeding around the room, asking each to contribute something to the list. In our classes, this violates common student expectations that we will initially call on volunteers. We also sometimes ask the student sitting to the right of a small group's recorder to report on behalf of his group, upsetting the students' sense that we will call on recorders or group volunteers. Such processes can energize students and the collective experience.

Very often, jazz compositions contain patterns of tension and release within their structure. Certain commonly employed cadences make use of dissonances which then set up resolutions (releases). This undulating scheme of tension and release for dramatic effect is a general principle not unique to music but widely pervasive in other art forms as well. In the classroom, we apply this principle primarily through the use of the Socratic method. In conjunction with the imperative which would require students to "know the chord changes," the Socratic method suspends students in periods of uncertainty (tension) during a class session. As multiple viewpoints and objective facts emerge during the course of an improvised discussion, the class engages in an individual and collective process that gradually results in some resolution, or release.

#### **PRACTICE #4: EDIT YOUR WORK**

Jazz saxophonist Gary Bartz has noted (Berliner, p. 243) that his improvement as a musician over the years is closely related to his learning how to edit his ideas, thus making him better able to follow ideas through to a logical conclusion. Our classroom experience has similarly taught us to understand the value of editing our statements for clarity. One of us uses overheads as a teaching tool; over the years, his overheads have become much less wordy and now emphasize only the essential points. We have had similar lessons with regard to class handouts.

This feature of jazz improvisation can help remind improvising teachers that improvisation does not mean being profligate by telling meandering stories that lack focus and clarity. It also should discourage teachers from concluding that sharing more knowledge is always better than being concise and cogent. Improvising teachers should learn to be vigilant about pruning their verbal contributions of elements that obfuscate or detract from the critical points. For us, teaching multiple sections of the same course in back-to-back periods provides many opportunities for editing our solos. It is common for

us to remind ourselves in the second session what we do not want to include from the earlier session.

### **PRACTICE #5: THINK AHEAD**

Often, good jazz improvisers play solos which are composed of phrases and lines that seem carefully thought through in advance. It is often said that a good improvised solo tells a story, taking us from point A to point B in a journey that seems logical, interesting and yet surprising. This means that the improviser is both attentive to the present (as she plays his solo, moving from one note to the next) but also thinking ahead to how each new phrase fits into the overall context of the “story” the solo is telling. Often, she may even have a certain destination that she will eventually wind his solo toward as he begins to conclude his performance.

And so it is in the classroom. For example, beginning a discussion of changeover time reduction, we try to get the class to reflect upon the impact on batch size. Once the class realizes that shorter changeover times can mean smaller, more frequent batches, I can help steer the discussion so that by the end of the class session, I have addressed at least three important points that I have thought ahead to: the quickness of response to customers; reduced inventory carrying costs; and reduced rework costs. Thus, while arguments unfold and a class discussion progresses, it is useful to think ahead to certain intermediate destinations. This not only helps control the line of discussion so it does not veer completely off-course, but also ensures the treatment of certain critical ideas that may be lost in the shuffle of a freewheeling, completely improvisatory class session.

Jazz compositions often contain turnarounds (or turnbacks) which are brief two- or four-measure chord progressions that set up a return to the initial, opening chords of the tune. Turnarounds also function as structural markers or signposts which might signal, for example, a change of soloist, the beginning of a new chorus by the same soloist, or even the conclusion of the piece. Analogously, it can be of value to incorporate such section markers or signposts in the structure of a class session to return to key issues, call upon students to respond to what the teacher has presented, or to conclude the session in a clear and logical manner.

For example, when discussing the three different costs of quality, we may begin with appraisal costs (costs of inspection of testing, which are easily defined), move on to failure costs (the costs of producing bad-quality products; these costs are often large and traced back to a multitude of causes) before concluding with prevention costs. This sequence then logically sets up the next section to follow which begins by asking students for ideas on *how* prevention of bad quality can be accomplished. Following on the heels of a discussion on prevention cost, the new section flows smoothly from the previous one. Thus some sections of material in a topic area can be constructed so that they conclude with a “pivot point” that might deftly propel the session forward with a minimum of non sequitur or abrupt change.

## **PRACTICE #6: RESPOND TO YOUR ACCOMPANISTS**

Readers may be asking themselves whether we think of teaching as a solo performance without an accompanying ensemble. We, most decidedly, do not. In fact, we find that our students are very often very capable accompanists and even fellow soloists. Seeing students as such is essential to using improvisational teaching to engage students in their learning. Thus, Gridley's suggestion that an improviser "respond to the rhythmic figures of his accompanists so that a creative interaction will occur" (page 28) is very appropriate to the classroom. Effective improvisational teaching builds upon the musical contributions – both rhythmic and melodic – of students. In fact, this feature of teaching – the interdependence of teacher and students – is what makes improvisation requisite. Because we cannot always predict the content of student questions or the swing of a class session, it is desirable to be flexible enough to adapt to our students as accompanists and fellow soloists. In leading discussions, skilled teachers point out how points made by individual students are related and how such points can contribute to one's understanding of a topic.

In the quality management elective discussed earlier, in the first few weeks of the semester, we noticed that one of the students made numerous references to benchmarking processes. A private conversation revealed that he was helping lead a large-scale benchmarking project at his place of employment. We then offered that in lieu of one of his assignments, he could take responsibility for conducting the class session on benchmarking. The accompanist stepped into the shoes of the ensemble leader for a performance. Listening to the accompanists and responding to their contributions can often result in such unplanned felicities.

It is a common jazz practice to engage in "trading fours or eights" by players improvising for four or eight measures each. Often this trading of solo bursts is not pre-planned but instead is dictated by the feeling of the moment. One common application of this idea in our classroom is to give quick assignments that may last only a few minutes. The students might, in small groups or even pairs, dialogue about this specific and focused assignment, airing their ideas to each other and perhaps even jotting down a few notes before responding to the question in full-class format. Doing this has the advantage of drawing out reticent or passive students through the quick group exercise. Once their ideas have been expressed in their groups, they will more easily find their way to the large-class discussion that ensues. Of course, there might be a good deal of redundancy of ideas across groups but we see little harm in several groups independently arriving at similar answers. In fact, it might even prove useful if the answers happen to be incorrect or misguided. A widespread belief in these ideas can lead the teacher to inquire into the reasons why this belief is mistakenly held by such a large proportion of the class.

## **THE ETERNAL CYCLE OF IMPROVISATION AND PRECOMPOSITION**

There is a centuries-old tradition of musical figures who were both formidable composers and renowned improvisers. For example, in the realm of Western classical music, Bach, Handel, Mozart and Liszt were all musical performers known for both their compositional gifts and their improvisational skills. Ian Carr (2000) notes that the two activities are closely connected: "Improvisation, at its best, is composition in motion with

all the inevitability of precomposition, and composition at its best has something of the immediacy and dynamism of improvisation.”

A jazz ensemble leader might take basic compositional material (for instance, a jazz standard like Thelonious Monk’s *Blue Monk*) and then fashion a unique arrangement of this familiar piece by playing with, modifying or highlighting certain melodic, harmonic and rhythmic aspects of the basic tune. Similarly, the management educator might view the textbook for the course as containing such basic compositional material. Working from this text material, she might fashion “precomposed arrangements” by the process of identifying the topic and sub-topic areas to be covered, and then developing lesson plans for each class session. However, once the performance (class session) begins, these precomposed plans can now serve as a springboard for improvised forays into certain aspects of the material.

It is common for beginning jazz improvisers to set about learning a basic repertoire of well-known “standard tunes.” In the bebop era of the 1940’s, after acquiring a thorough familiarity with this repertoire, both in terms of playing the tunes and improvising extensively upon those tunes, performers began to distill elements from those improvisations and crystallize them into new compositions. Interestingly, because of the gradual evolutionary manner of their composition, these tunes were essentially new melodies floating atop the pre-existing chord changes of standard tunes that had helped seed them. These new pieces, a result of the cyclical process from composition to improvisation to renewed composition, were called contrafacts. Thus, according to Berliner (p. 222), "There is a perpetual cycle between improvised and precomposed components of the artists' knowledge. . . . The proportion of precomposition to improvising is likewise subject to continual change throughout a performance."

As management educators who attempt to apply improvisational principles in the classroom, we witness the continuous development of such contrafacts each semester. Some of them endure and prove continually effective, while others burn brightly but briefly, dying away without becoming “standards.” For example, in the quality control topic area of the production/operations management course, we initially chose to treat quality assurance procedures in a qualitative (not quantitatively-based) manner. However, upon encountering one particular class group of acute quantitative ability, we modified our approach midway through the semester to include detailed development of statistical control charts and process capability indices. In subsequent semesters, this proved to be cumbersome because of the modest quantitative ability (and consequent sluggish pace of progress) of the students in the class. So, we chose to drop the coverage of control charts but retain the use of process capability analysis because its quantitative demands were less onerous.

Consequently, the development of new contrafacts and fresh compositions over time tend to slowly change the performance repertoire of an ensemble over time. Comparing the detailed breakdown of content areas in our courses from fifteen years ago to our current course content, we discover that entire topic areas have been excised, and many others radically modified, some of them nearly beyond recognition. The gradual evolutionary process which has been at work here has been seeded by steady, incremental improvisations of the kind that have been cited here.

Different jazz musical groups tend to strike different balances between the proportion of composed material and that which is improvised. Similarly, we have

discovered that advanced or elective-level courses tend to lend themselves to a greater level of improvisation relative to the level of “precomposed” teaching plans. The level of sophistication of the students, their level of work experience, their greater familiarity with the various functional areas of business and their increased analytical ability contribute to the greater likelihood of fruitful improvisations in any class session.

Finally, one might even go as far as to say that some element of improvisation is all but inevitable given multiple “performances” of the same material from semester to semester, year to year. Singer Carmen Lundy dryly observes (Berliner, p.66) that “creativity sometimes seeds new inventions as a result of the monotony of repeated performance routines....after you have sung a song a hundred and fifty times, the chances are that you are going to begin doing little, different things with it.” In retrospect, our personal experience in the classroom can be said to mirror this analogy. After “singing the same song the same way” for several semesters, improvisation occurs unavoidably.

## **DOWNSIDES TO IMPROVISATIONAL TEACHING**

We are aware that improvisational teaching involves giving up some things that teachers sometimes hold dear. By its very nature, such teaching means that one should not expect uniformity of either the processes or the outcomes of class sessions. Therefore, testing and other evaluation processes must be sensitive to the specific experiences of an ensemble. This may mean that a teacher’s favorite questions or assignments are not appropriate to a given group’s experiences. (Unless, of course, as is common in our teaching, one builds his sessions and soloing on a structure which assumes those favorite questions.)

Improvisational teaching is also not for those who are not willing and eager to embrace a certain level of ambiguity in the classroom. We are not always able to predict where our students’ solos will take us or that we will be able to answer their questions satisfactorily. Our students do not always remember the chord changes, leaving us with the burden of working to understand their ideas and questions and, when possible, to respond to them in ways that help them learn those changes. Needless to say, the improvisational teacher can not always predict and control the music made in his or her classroom.

## **A CODA**

Improvisational teaching is fraught with risks, uncertainties, and the unexpected. And yet these challenges can result in a teaching experience that is exciting, surprising, and more rewarding than the assured comforts of a comprehensively pre-arranged teaching plan.

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