

Improvising on the Blue Guitar

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INTRODUCTION

In “Those Who Can’t: Fantasy, Reality, and the Teacher’s Art,” Charles Bingham finds something positive in the oft cited phrase, “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” Dissatisfied with the varied yet consistently pejorative analyses of the phrase, Bingham proposes that the teacher’s perceived lack-of-ability mirrors that of the artists’; they both create a transitional space in which those who enter are “allowed to play and explore without having to ask the question: ‘Is this fantasy, or is this reality?’”¹ The teacher’s “can’t” is not related to failure, but rather to work that does not conform to proscribed understandings of “doing.” Essentially, the can/can’t phrase tries to wedge teaching’s square peg into a round hole.

In what follows, I provide enthusiastic support for Bingham’s conception of the transitional space as art. However, I question the idea of the teacher as solitary artist. Teaching at its core is relational, and I propose that the liminal transitional space Bingham describes may be best understood as improvisational art, collectively created and performed by an ensemble of students and teacher.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE ARTIST-TEACHER

Bingham writes: “The teacher’s work of art is the . . . ‘transitional space’ established for [and interpreted by] the student.”² The artist-teacher who creates this space can be seen in a number of ways. She can be seen as a visual artist, creating interactive art installations, such as *In Orbit* in which spectators climb on webs and web objects suspended in space, or other installations like the series *Flowers and People* in which digital images of flowers bloom and die in response to the position of the spectator.³ The teacher’s art as installation is dynamic in

the interpretation and interaction of the spectator-student. It is an object to be seen, heard, touched, and experienced. When the spectator-student moves on, the installation remains fundamentally unchanged, ready for the next spectator.

We might also think of the artist-teacher as composer. In music, composing is seen as a separate skill from making music through instruments or performing. In formal theater and film, the same is true. Writers compose plays and screenplays; actors perform them. We train accordingly. We often train teachers as composers. They learn about the field and subject matter, how to establish classroom values and procedures, how to create their lessons, and then how to invite students to enter the space composed for them. The students then interpret the composition in ways that “will not be completely under [the teacher’s] control.”²⁴ In both teacher as composer and teacher as installation artist, the work of art is relatively fixed. Its life extends beyond a particular group of student-spectators. It is even possible for the teacher to be absent in an important sense from the space she has created in these conceptions.

A third conception of the artist-teacher is as performer. Here, the object of art is made in performance; the teacher *plays* a tune on the blue guitar. The performance conception underscores the dimensions of time and interactivity in the transitional space. In performance, a lesson is not fixed; it moves and shifts over time and in attuned response to students. The playing space does not exist separate from the interaction with students except in the sense a screenplay exists separately from a film. Teachers, however, are not simply writers of curriculum. They are teachers. And if they are artists, they are performance artists in the sense that their work (the object) of art is inseparable from the *work* (the making) of the art. The artist-teacher makes and remakes her song on the blue guitar in response to the particular ways her students interpret and interact with and in it. In this way, she creates and maintains the transitional space in and through time.

This time-space can only be established if, as Bingham notes, students are willing to suspend disbelief. They must join the band. In “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” sociologist Alfred Schütz describes the “mutual tuning-in relationship” that develops when musicians make music

together.⁵ This relationship “originates in the possibility of living together simultaneously” in time.⁶ In playing music together, each performer has:

to take into account what the other has to execute in simultaneity. He has not only to interpret his own part, which as such remains necessarily fragmentary, but he has also to anticipate the other player’s interpretation of his—the other’s—part and, even more, the other’s anticipations of his own execution.... [Both have] to foresee by listening to the other, by [warnings] and anticipations, any turn the other’s interpretation may take and has to be prepared at any time to be leader or follower.⁷

In making music together on the blue guitar, students and teachers co-create and co-perform the transitional space in intense mutual attunement, making teaching an ensemble art. When the attunement is lost, so is the transitional space. In addition to suspension of disbelief as a necessary condition of the space, I add mutual attunement.

IMPROVISATION

But why might teaching be a collective *improvisational art*? One could argue that the band is simply playing the lead guitarist’s composition for the first time. This line of thinking, however, diminishes the liminal transitional nature of the space Bingham describes. Improvisation captures this nature in a number of ways.

Philosophers characterize improvisation as “interrupting the given,”⁸ “unfixing,”⁹ and “unsettling certainties.”¹⁰ We see this exemplified by Chicago’s Second City alum Tina Fey in her description of an improvised scene in which a player opens with, “Freeze, I have a gun!” A second player responds with, “The gun I gave you for Christmas! You bastard!”¹¹ Assuming the first player intended to engage in an armed robbery, the information introduced by the second player—a *Christmas gift* gun—challenges many assumptions of the first player. In this example, we see how improvisers don’t simply follow the

first rule of improvisation and say “Yes!” by suspending disbelief; they respect the second rule of improvisation and follow the “Yes!” with “And ... ” The “And ... ” thwarts anticipated or habitual responses and destabilizes the space in productive ways.

This destabilization catalyzes the players to work together to make sense of what has been introduced. Essentially, improvisers collectively inquire. Experimental musician Cornelius Cardew describes the process of improvising as “*searching* for sounds and for the responses that attach to them.”¹² Eddie Prévost, founder of the first free improvisational band AMM, writes: “To make [improvised] music is to hypothesize, to test every sound.”¹³ In an unsettled, uncertain and transitional space, improvisers collectively and continuously seek to make sense of what has come before without knowing what will come next.

The future in the improvisational space hinges on the present moment, forcing players to tune into each other and live fully and simultaneously together. As new notes and information are added, the past re-originate. Philosopher of improvisation, Gary Peters, explains: improvisation “invite[s] us to make a transition from a closed conception of the past to one that rethinks it as an endlessly ongoing event or occurrence ... ”¹⁴ In a tangible sense, improvisation begins again each moment as the past is reimagined in light of an unsettled present and a contingent future. Improvisation is transitional space.

Improvisation, like transitional space, has an essentially ephemeral nature. Musician Derek Bailey illustrates:

improvisation can be considered as the celebration of the moment ... Essentially ... fleeting; its reality is its moment of performance ... [A]ny attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of...improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.¹⁵

As academics, we can only gently apprehend improvisation and the pedagogical experience before it dissolves into memory or anticipation. Perhaps this shared

aspect of their natures also contributes to the difficulties in describing what it is that teachers “do.”

CONCLUSION

“Yes!” it makes sense to think of the teacher as artist, “And ...” it also makes sense to think of the song on the blue guitar as collectively improvised. Teachers and students co-create the tune “beyond us yet ourselves”¹⁶ as they live simultaneously in the moment, reimagining the past, and anticipating an uncertain future. There are no spectators in this pedagogical experience, only an ensemble of artists collectively creating and performing the space.

1 Charles Bingham, “Those Who Can’t: Fantasy, Reality, and the Teacher’s Art,” in *Philosophy and Education Society 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 Ibid.

3 Tomas Saraceno, *In Orbit* (2013). Large scale installation in k21 ständehaus, Düsseldorf, Germany. TeamLab, *Flowers and People* (2015). Interactive digital art, <https://www.teamlab.art/?submit=flowers+and+people>.

4 Bingham, “Those Who Can’t,” 2019.

5 Alfred Schutz, “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” *Social Research* 18, no. 1 (March 1951), 79.

6 Ibid., 79.

7 Ibid., 95. An extensive discussion of inner and outer time in making music with others can be found on pages 94–96.

8 Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 35.

9 Ibid., 3.

10 Panagiotis Kanellopoulos, “Freedom and Responsibility: The Aesthetics of Free Musical Improvisation and Its Educational Implications—A View from Bakhtin,” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2011), 127.

11 Tina Fey, *Bossypants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011): 83–84.

12 Cornelious Cardew, “Toward an Ethic of Improvisation,” *Treatise Handbook* (1971). Retrieved from <http://soundartarchive.net/articles/Cardew-1971-Towards%20an%20Ethic%20of%20Improvisation.pdf>.

13 Edwin John Prévost, *No Sound is Innocent* (Harlow, United Kingdom: COPULA,

1997): 33.

14 Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, 2.

15 Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), ix.

16 Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 165.