

# Improvisation as a Curricular Metaphor: Imagining Education for a Rural Creative Class

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*Rural communities contain a largely unacknowledged innovative capacity founded on improvisational traditions. These traditions may be rooted in work practices in agriculture and other rurally-based productive activities but today they have expanded into other lifeworld locations, particularly virtual spaces that accelerate time-space compression. I make the case here that in the networked world of high modernity or postmodernity, both the nature of rurality and the potential of rural education need to be theorized differently. I begin with a critique of Richard Florida's metrocentric idea of the creative class, then move to reconceptualizing rurality as a real and imagined space, and conclude by analyzing a film and video project in an Atlantic Canadian school that used improvisation in literacy curriculum work. I argue that improvisation is a potentially productive metaphor for curriculum, one which draws on rural traditions and local funds of knowledge while at the same time incorporating a productive, forward-looking engagement with new technologies.*

## **Innovation and the Rural**

About a decade ago the American sociologist Richard Florida (2003) created a stir with his book *The Rise of the Creative Class*. In this and subsequent works (2004, 2009), Florida argues that contemporary economies are now driven by cadres of highly educated, diverse, mobile knowledge workers laboring in what is now called cognitive capitalism (Peters & Bulut, 2011). This creative class labors in industries that include education, the arts, information technology, and in other work essentially involved in the production and manipulation of symbols. Its relentless mobility, its bohemian tastes, and its diverse, multicultural character distinguish Florida's creative class. Florida demonstrates how the rise of the creative class is also the story of the rise of certain vibrant cities like Boston and Seattle and the decline of

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other cities like Cleveland and Detroit. The creative class is drawn to those places that welcome difference.

Like Rust Belt industrial cities and towns, rural places are considered to lack the diversity, tolerance and innovative capacity to prosper in cognitive capitalism built on immaterial labor, digital technologies, cultural industries, and service work (particularly financial services). In rural areas, people are said to be attached to place and to kinship and tradition in a way that inhibits the kind of freethinking and openness that is crucial to success in globalized cognitive capitalism. In this vision, rurality is once again positioned as the antithesis of modernity. This plays out educationally in a longstanding discourse many of us working in rural education have been writing and talking about for years (Carr & Kefalas, 2009; Corbett, 2006; DeYoung, 1995; Donehower et al., 2007; Howley & Howley, 2010; Sherman, 2009; Theobald, 1997). The rural (like the ghetto and the inner city) is a geographic space for depositing complex problems and then reducing the problems themselves to the dispositions of the people who live there (Popkewitz, 1998). Then, rather than addressing the complexity of the problems, a decontextualized,

standardized, metrocentric education and a systematic elevation of rural people themselves is proposed as the final solution. In this analysis, rurality itself is education's other, a kind of antithesis of the institutional learning process.

I disagree with Florida not because I think he is wrong about diversity and tolerance, but because the implications of his thesis tend to reinforce well-established stereotypes that position rural citizens as narrow, prejudiced, lacking innovative flexibility, and pretty much inhabiting dysfunctional places that are best abandoned and which are unworthy of modern services (like schools). Florida misunderstands the many dimensions of both creativity and social class in his analysis as well as the way that these two important features of social life blend into one another. It is actually Florida who offers a rather narrow metrocentric vision of innovation that obscures the resilience and innovative capacity in rural communities. In fact, I have been working with rural youth who are, I argue below, craving more creative opportunity to use new information technologies within the school curriculum.

Florida's view imagines a class of networked, mobile symbol-manipulators as the foundation of the economic development process. This ignores the necessity of a large number of people whose work is still very much about creating the material infrastructure of urban and suburban spaces. Furthermore, it is not only the mobile urban creative class that is on the move. In rural and remote Australia resource industries are run by the efforts of mobile labor shuttled in to "FIFO" (fly in – fly out) and "DIDO" (drive in – drive out) industrial work camps (Cleary, 2012). Today in my largely rural part of Canada there is the bizarre circumstance of armies of mobile industrial workers (many of them from rural villages) who fly around the globe to be deployed in construction, mining, and in what Thomas Homer-Dixon has recently called the Canadian petro-state oil and gas production (Homer-Dixon, 2013; Proctor, 2013) while guest workers from Mexico and the Caribbean are brought in to harvest the crops (Pietropaolo, 2009). Something very similar operates in most North American cities and in many parts of Europe where much of the service work is done by mobile, temporary or semi-permanent labor deployed out of what used to be called the Third World. What this allows people to do is to hold on to homes in the rural places they want to live while they work where they must.

It must also be said that among the things the creative class produces is a massive virtual playground for our networked devices. On the serious side it also creates the form of economic development that involves liquid financial transaction, computer algorithms trading stock and with hedge fund managers betting not only on what will succeed but also what will fail. These precarious risk environments have generated a series of leveraged credit debacles and the aristocratic compensation awarded to the gamblers and con artists who operate (and often rig) the

game. While he claims to be interested in diversity and social justice, Florida's world with its winners and losers, its geography and sociology, and the political and educational implications of his thesis raise numerous questions not the least of which is what happens when we ignore ecology and effectively write off those who see themselves as stewards of the land and sea.

### A Few Words About the Rural

As much as we are remiss to define rurality, I want to suggest that we might understand the rural as a space of intersections and tensions, of people and place, of people and people, of place and space, and so forth. Rurality, as I understand it, is about connections and stewardship. Rural matters because we make it matter, sometimes as a discursive spatial rubbish bin for the evasion of complexity and social ills including racialized discourses. This was the case when in 2011 Air Canada blamed "rural people" for violence in Winnipeg (CBC, 2011). This was a thinly veiled reference to Aboriginal people displaced by bush fires. At the same time though rurality is a location for many positive identifications and imaginaries.

Bill Green's (Green & Letts, 2007; Reid, et al., 2010) trialectical idea of rural social space (which draws on Lefebvre, 1992) as imaginary, representational and material I think gets at the complexity I want to point to here. First of all, rural is what we think it is in our various imaginary constructions. And of course there are as many imaginaries as there are people with imagination. Rurality is also what we say it is when we represent it symbolically and when we consume the representations of others. And finally, there is material that sits beneath our language games in what Lacan (2007) called "the Real," that space we try so hard to understand with our representations, but which always eludes us. We desperately attempt to finally *know* the physical reality of the rural by measuring distances (usually from urban areas), population densities and by alluding to productive activities and landscapes. But then we realize that we are in Derrida and Bass's (1978) universe of difference where words only make sense in relation to other words. The rural is a boundless complexity whose shape shifts with our attempts to describe it. So inevitably, we do what we always do: we soldier on as though we know what we are talking about. We set aside the basic question and get on with the business of thinking about rural education anyhow.

The rural is, of course, only definable in relation to other terms (like urban) that oppose, differ from, and shape it. For me, rural is founded both in cultivation, resource extraction, and in the more or less wild spaces outside urban boundaries. These are the spaces that remind us of dusty, earthy, elusive Real, the world we inhabit outside the magnificence of the ambivalent miracle of the produced spaces of urban capitalism (Lefebvre, 1992). Aboriginal

and indigenous scholars patiently remind us how in this fragile landscape that we meet one another (Marker, 2009; Somerville, 2013).

This fragile sense of space is paradoxically captured in the dystopian, post-peak oil novels of Cormack McCarthy (2006), Margaret Atwood (2010), James Kunstler (2009) and in the non-fiction of Jane Jacobs (2005), Jarrod Diamond (2006), and particularly, in Alan Weisman's (2008) *The World Without Us* which hypothesizes a surprisingly rapid return to nature should we disappear from the planet. The rural is important because it is real and in a sense because it is necessary and inevitable. In a study undertaken by the Canadian Federation of Municipalities (2005), it was estimated that a per-capita land base of 8 eight hectares is required to support contemporary Canadian urban lifestyles. Apart from the rather obvious fact that this is totally unsustainable at the global level, it illustrates the interdependency of rural and urban space.

What I am talking about here is perhaps better expressed through the Australian Aboriginal idea of *country* (Somerville, 2013). Country is the complex and deep spiritual ecology that interconnects people and land in an intimate way. The enduring value of the idea of rurality is, for me, located in the way it represents the intersection of people and place. I think we are all becoming increasingly aware of how important the intersections of indigenous and settler populations are in places like North America and Australia. Unfortunately I think, the term rural has been used to distance settler populations from both urban and aboriginal peoples. As David Greenwood (2009) argues, we need to rethink this. The historic encounters between us have been, and continue to be, significantly located in spaces we understand as rural.

The trouble is that many of our imaginaries do not encourage the new encounters we need. The recent Superbowl advertisement that ran in early 2013 entitled *God Made a Farmer*<sup>1</sup> is one of many examples of how rurality is represented in popular media. The advertisement is thick with hegemonic rural masculinity, expansive agricultural landscapes, religious allusion and moral presumption; and predictably, the hero is a pickup truck. The text also represents the importance of a morality of simplicity and hard work that is reminiscent of the social class distinctions described in Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984).

Bourdieu plays with a very old opposition: that of necessity versus volition or choice. He argues that a person's distance from necessity is one of the distinguishing features of middle and upper class status and power. The middle classes (which today we might indeed call the creative class) make a virtue of not having to work with their hands, of not having to make things themselves and of having the time and space to appreciate and consume things that are not

needed for survival, like gourmet food, fine wine, elite art and esoteric literature. The working classes, on the other hand, make a virtue of eating and dressing simply, being able to work with their hands, to "make do," build things themselves, and be able to survive no matter what the conditions like those farmers God made. They take pride in their robust and resilient physical toughness, not their sophistication. Their proximity to necessity is their virtue. This straightforward, no-nonsense moral dynamic is clearly at play in *God Made a Farmer*. And proximity to necessity breeds a particular kind of innovation, the creative, vernacular, under-the-radar, unschooled knowledge that James Scott (1999) calls *métis*. This kind of knowledge is also called alternative or indigenous in other circles. Norma Gonzales, Luis Moll and Catherine Amanti (2005) refer to something similar in terms of funds of knowledge. It is the working knowledge that comes to us through our inevitable immersion in culture. This line in the Superbowl advertisement illustrates the improvisational point when God (channeled through the narrator Paul Harvey) declares:

I need somebody who can shape an ax handle from a persimmon sprout, shoe a horse with a hunk of car tire, who can make harness out of haywire, feed sacks and shoe scraps.

Yet the farmers in the advertisement neither speak, use telephones, nor do they work on computers, preferring instead to do their talking with big machines. They are portrayed as tough rustics with serious tractors and pickup trucks to match. Like all stereotypes, this one contains some truth, but the rural families I know also spend a lot of time, effort and technological skill figuring out markets, talking with one another, and securing what they need in order to produce. These families are remarkably diverse, adaptable, and they improvise continually in precarious market and weather conditions. What Richard Florida seems to have missed is the emerging story of how both mobile work and the precariousness of energy and food security have created the conditions where another innovative creative class (which has been there all along) operates under the radar in the dusty, oily, gassy, salty, earthy material reality of rurally-based resource entrepreneurship. Writing about the unlikely emergence of the United States as the new global energy production superpower, New York Times columnist David Brooks (2013) puts it this way:

... the big winners in the current economy are the "Material Boys" — the people who grow grain, drill for fuel and lay pipeline. The growing parts of the world, meanwhile, are often the commodity belts, resource-rich places with good rule of law like Canada, Norway, and Australia.

<sup>1</sup> See: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHjV-FPMm\\_I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHjV-FPMm_I)

What this demonstrates is the intimate interconnection between the rural and the urban remains vital and that Florida's urban creative class operates in a material world where producing food, energy, water, fiber, clean air, and the infrastructure that supports life is still largely a rural affair. It is also here where the most consequential ecological battle lines are currently being drawn (Pawlick, 2009). It is in the encounters, in this case between rural productivity/production and urban consumption/needs that the most interesting developments emerge. And this is where the most interesting and often frightening geopolitics also emerge as a couple of generations of Middle East conflict have demonstrated.

### **Improvisation and Schooling**

Brooks also writes about innovation and improvisation when he argues that the most interesting innovations come not from the high tech gurus of the conference circuit, but from the modest plodders working in agriculture, mining and energy. This connects I think with Bourdieu's arguments in *Distinction*. By all appearances what goes on in the chemistry lab or in the math class, or in studying Southeast Asian geopolitics or Shakespeare appears to be a good way from necessity. Bourdieu's point is that it is the esoteric nature of these knowledge forms, like their gastronomic or fashion parallels that actually mark those who master and "appreciate" these practices as educated people. Those who eschew these knowledge forms mark themselves, in large part through their own agency and distinction patterns as "practical" people whose interest in formal education is largely instrumental and vocational (Corbett, 2009). It is a problem that has been studied to death by sociologists for generations. The result of these studies is by now sickeningly familiar. The children of people who hold pragmatic values and who distinguish intelligence and righteousness in these terms do not tend to do very well in school, and in fact, claim as part of their virtue (even if they can't necessarily articulate it well) that they are sensible, practical people who have no time for affectation and foolishness. In part, it is their own ethical framework, the one that supports them in life that dooms them in school creating gaps in educational achievement.

I think a curricular focus on improvisation rather than scripted performances might help bridge this gap. I think by paying attention to improvisation as a framework for curriculum that we can go some distance toward making schools more hospitable for rural, working class, aboriginal, and minority students. I think improvisation also holds more hope than the currently popular scripted, transmission pedagogies for producing the kinds of students, who can address environmental degradation, globalized capitalism and who will become the confident creative innovators who will steer us through the uncertain waters of climate change.

Space to improvise is also what youth crave in school. This is essentially what we have learned from the research project I am about to describe. At the same time though, we learned that school is also a rural space steeped in traditions or what Bourdieu (1984, 1992) calls "habitus," those repeated social practices that are considered right and good mainly because they have persisted for so long.

### **An Improvisational Research Project**

Beginning in 2008, along with co-investigator Ann Vibert and school administrator Bob Shields I became involved in a research project that investigated the introduction of film and video into the literacy curriculum of a small town middle school in Atlantic Canada. The fundamental process was to introduce student teachers to the technical skills involved in filmmaking that combined a variant of theatre games, an improvisational drama teaching frameworks inspired by Viola Spolin (1986) and Dorothy Heathcote (Bolton & Heathcote, 1995). This literacy work built on the ideas of local filmmaker and research collaborator Kimberly Smith's who has developed a non-hierarchical process in which all members of video "ensemble" groups take turns participating in all aspects of the filmmaking process.<sup>1</sup> Here, I want to address the way that improvisation has become a metaphor for our thinking about curriculum more broadly.

We began by teaching two cycles of 12 student teachers how to use Smith's video ensemble process in the context of a film-making course I run for pre-service teachers and we brainstormed how to adapt it to middle school. We then met with three classroom teachers and planned collaboratively how to mobilize the student teachers in their classrooms to work with small group student video ensembles. Then student teachers worked with groups of middle school students. Through the process, graduate students observed the process and kept field journals. At the end of each cycle we interviewed what we called the four constituencies in the research: the teachers, a sample of parents, the student teachers, and did focus groups with students.

### **The Parents: Safety and The Hierarchy of Text**

We were interested to find out how parents interpret the incursion of new media into curriculum. They told us that they quite liked what we were doing with the children but did not really see it as literacy. While they understood the importance of new literacies to their children, and while many worked in digital environments themselves, the parents still tended to see school as a place for standard pencil and paper literacies.

Essentially the parents thought that schoolwork was a kind of necessary boredom, irrelevant to many students, esoteric even, but at the same time good for children. The

1 See <http://www.creativeaction.ca>

parents realized however, that their children live in a cave equipped with elaborate, personalized entertainment centres at home with mobile adjuncts. They are used to being entertained and will not tolerate a steady diet of drudgery. The parents saw our film work with their children as a diversion and what one parent described as a “safety valve.” Like recess, work in film-making served as a release from schooling as usual.

When we asked parents about what counted for them as legitimate and appropriate literacy instruction, their responses tended to speak to the material practices of reading and writing they remembered from their own schooling. They focused on things like the act of handwriting within known genres such as the formal letter and the essay, as well as getting the correct meaning from authorized books. When they spoke of reading they used what we called a hierarchy of text to describe the relative importance of different forms of written material. The relative importance of these texts essentially mirrored Ivor Goodson and Colin Marsh’s (1996) hierarchy of curriculum with abstract maths, the “hard” sciences and classic literature at the top, the social and life sciences in the middle and pragmatic and arts-based subject areas at the bottom. This curricular hierarchy was supplemented by a textual hierarchy relating to what we call the relative “plasticity” of the text itself. The “hard copy” book (to use one parent’s language) sat at the top representing status reading. At the bottom was the plastic virtual text of text and instant messaging, Twitter feeds, Facebook, video games, and so forth.

Our work with film was also placed at the bottom of the textual hierarchy. This is not to say that it was considered unimportant, but its importance was grounded in an unexpected way. Parents fully realized that their children must learn to navigate what they saw as a dangerous and complex world of online virtual engagements. They saw school as having a role to play here in terms of promoting safe practices (not unlike sex education). Much of the parental discourse about new information technologies focused on maturity-related safety concerns, the early sexualization of children (growing up too fast), and the vulnerabilities to predation and irresponsible online behavior that are opened up by premature exposure to adult content.

In this framing, curriculum is understood as an instrument of safety that provides professional guidance to young people in a way that is similar to the professional framing of knowledge represented by the hard copy textbook and the teacher-directed classroom. Curriculum and literacies were in this way understood in terms of authority and guidance (Corbett & Vibert, 2010). Parents thought that school should be principally a controlled textual environment which contrasts and mitigates the potential harms associated with the textual anarchy of the internet, video games, films and other spaces in pop culture. In school, parents expected

knowledge in neat, authorized packages revealed slowly in developmentally appropriate sequence and form. So the production of video was in a grey zone not only in terms of legitimate literacy, but also in terms of adults’ ability to control textual production. Indeed, the improvised films students made were edgy and often ironic, poking fun particularly at adults’ penchant for regulating children and youth, often sending up “advice to children genres.”

### **The Established Teachers: The Balancing Act**

At the outset of the project we were principally interested in the way that the established teachers mediate the tension between scripting and interpretation, or between those aspects of curriculum that demand standardization and specified outcome-based performativity on the one hand, and open-ended creativity on the other. Today the watchword that hovers over and inside teacher’s discourse is one of “balance.” Balance is understood as the management of competing expectations that teachers will meet predefined outcomes in a way that takes into consideration the individuality of children’s learning needs, abilities and interests (differentiated instruction), their relative positions in terms of the social and cultural location (inclusion and equity), and emerging communicative affordances that are opened up by a networked, technologically mediated consumer culture.

We found the teachers to be partly open to the idea of film as literacy, and while they understood the importance of multiple forms of literacy and multiple media, ultimately the default position was a retreat into the assessed paper and pencil pedagogies driven by the standardized test. They spoke the language of balance but effectively treated our project as an interesting diversion and “theoretically” a good idea, but one that would take too much time and effort for them to take on board personally. They were impressed with the work of the student teachers and that of their own students in film-making, but they did not come to see how they themselves could: a) find time to develop the skill set and confidence to make films with their students and b) cut out space for their students to make films and still find the time required to prepare them for assessments that have nothing to do with this literacy. They also indicated what we came to call the “shine” factor, or the idea that some children whose regular school work was weak were able to “shine” in improvisational film work and show what they knew. This was professionally and pedagogically interesting to the teachers but not consequentially so because the growth they saw did not, they thought, fit within the ambit of consequential mandated assessment practices.

The balance they walked and improvised through was a tight rope of quotidian classroom life, assessment report writing, institutional form-filling, preparing students for tests (which in Canada are not particularly high stakes, but

whose results are published), dealing with diverse and challenging students, and so forth. They were all effective teachers who improvised their way more or less reflectively through the institutional expectations, the needs of their students, and their own teaching interests. Fundamentally though, they felt compelled by district and departmental mandates to devote much of their time to standardized assessment tasks, record keeping, planning for differentiation of instruction and preparing students for test material and conditions.

From the point of view of changing literacies teaching practice, the impact of our work was what might be called a limited success. Systematic pressure and the habitus of established teaching practices within which teachers understood how to improvise remained resilient satisfying parental desire for control and safety despite everyone's acknowledgement of the importance of new audiovisual literacies. This all-too predictable development suggests the importance of longer term sustained engagements if research is going to be able to significantly influenced teaching practice.

### **The Pre-Service Teachers. It Works But Will We Be Allowed?**

Given the improvisational and exploratory nature of professional work, pre-service teachers are in a particularly vulnerable and difficult position as they endeavor to learn a complex and nuanced practice. Many student teachers approach their early professional studies with the view that they will be "taught how to teach." As things progress, most come to understand the impossibility of learning to teach in a functional sense. They learn that by adopting a rigid technical-rational approach to the work of teaching that things can fall apart pretty quickly. So the classic image of the student teacher diligently following a lesson plan while his or her students descend into chaos or go to sleep is a familiar stereotype. Learning how to creatively and thoughtfully seize a "teachable moment," how to "wing it," or to learn that it is not "all about you," are other familiar pre-service teacher tropes. In other words, they embark on the improvisational journey that is teaching.

In the process, there is often a good deal of skepticism and even cynicism about teacher education because if nobody can teach you how to teach, and if learning is fundamentally experiential, then why waste time in teacher education, particularly those elements of the process devoted to theory. The theory-practice polarity is probably the central generative binary that drives most popular perceptions of teacher education.

The student teachers were all keen to promote new literacies in their teaching but most were nervous and uncertain about both their own developing teaching skills and the extent to which these new literacies can be integrated with superordinate, assessed curriculum requirements. Because they themselves are so enmeshed in digital media,

they understand the power of these literacies immediately and personally. At the same time though, most felt pressured to conform within a system that expects them to attend primarily to traditional print-based literacies.

The particular improvisation of the student teachers was to work in the tension between the vibrant, highly visual and communicative literacies they know and use every day, and the relatively pale but high status literacies they think are valued and assessed in school. Whether or not they would be "allowed" to improvise and to use new technologies to promote literacies work is their question. They were watchful and not particularly hopeful in the sense that most of them believe that institutional pressures will force them to become like the previous generation of teachers. They saw the established teachers operating improvisationally and comfortably within traditional structures that mirrored what they had seen in student teaching all through their teacher education programs. Thus, they tended to think that while this sort of teaching practice is not necessarily what they would choose to enact, they felt compelled to develop some version of it so that the students would be ready for testing and so that they could fit in to the culture of teaching and find a job.

At the same time, the student teachers felt the energy generated by the open-ended creative process and understood how "it works" in the sense of improvisation's potential for creating an engaging way to work with students and with curriculum. For the student teachers, the enthusiasm and resistance of the middle school students through their video work illustrated its power rather than its dangers or irrelevance. These young teachers were also developing skill and visibility as technological leaders and innovators through their work with the project. Other teachers in the school took notice and had questions.

Subsequent to the research several of these beginning teachers have secured positions teaching film and video. Indeed, some of the student teachers have been hired specifically because of their ability to use film and video in their subject area or classroom teaching. While the dead hand of the past always weighs heavy in school, the presence of these young teachers in the system provides an interesting improvisational opening.

### **The Middle School Students: Voice and Social Class**

The final constituency in this research is the middle school students who participated in the research. Over the two years, we worked with approximately 200 middle school students in the sixth to the eighth grades. These students were very happy to see film introduced into the literacy curriculum of their school, principally because they too understood the entire process to be a break from school. Because it was active and engaging and involved their own ideas and interpretations, it was seen as the antithesis of school. While the students universally welcomed this break, they differed considerably in terms of how deep they

thought the break ought to extend into the normal practices of schooling.

The students with whom we worked in this project were clustered or streamed through the very Canadian school choice mechanism of a special program that is designed ostensibly to promote cultural and linguistic diversity. Two of the three classes were in an English language stream while the other was in a French immersion stream. French immersion is the only federally funded curriculum initiative in Canada, a country that still has no national ministry of education. This program was implemented in the 1980s and it became popular with middle class parents who wanted their children to be positioned for work in the federal bureaucracy and in other high status job markets where bilingualism is an asset, if not a requirement. French immersion has also served as a streaming mechanism that effectively creates a private school within the public school as middle class families tend to “choose” French immersion while working class and rural families tend to “choose” English stream programs.

Perhaps predictably the students were not concerned about “growing up too fast.” “We’re growing at just the right speed. There is no other speed,” one student commented cryptically. They identified ubiquitous prejudice against youth and spoke about how a lot of fears are overblown leading to them being infantilized and not trusted to make their own decisions. Indeed, the English stream students referred repeatedly to the highly controlled nature of their schooled experience and the passive, transmission-orientation nature of most curricula. Interestingly, at least one teacher sat in on all of these focus groups and nodded in agreement with these comments. There were no secrets here and there appeared to be a compulsory, shared ennui. It was as though everyone was equally alienated and just doing his or her job, which is the assimilation of tested content.

The students in the English stream were also robustly ironic throughout the focus groups, which they saw as another recapitulation of a teacher-led question and answer session, a style of teaching with which they were well familiar. Their films also played sarcastically on the normal structure of schooling and the way that youth are talked down to by adults both in school and in the media. The films they made were much more sophisticated in terms of content and plot and the English stream students “got” improvisation almost immediately as opposed to the French immersion students many of whom wanted to script everything at first. At the same time, the English stream students saw improvisational work as being entirely disconnected from schooling as usual and while they loved the “break” they saw no way that this work could be incorporated into school curriculum as they understood it. So they were more resistant to the structure of obligatory boredom but saw no hope that their authentic voices could ever be heard in school.

The French Immersion students, in contrast, could see clearly how film work linked both to their current literacy

practices, personal interests and to potential future careers. They were however, unsure about the appropriate balance between the more routinized standard pedagogy of schooling-as-usual and more open-ended creative work. They understood the high status nature of standardized assessments and were worried about their performance. They agreed with their teachers and parents, that there is a connection between work patterns they saw as boring, test performance, and ultimately success in life. At the same time though, they were able to see the relevance of the improvisational film work we did with them to learning content that might be useful to them. They understood the importance of structured content delivery methods but they also saw that their own knowledge production and agency were important. Yet their films were, particularly at first, nervous and tentative. They actually learned to loosen up and how to be funny from the English stream students.

While the English stream working class youth were better improvisers, the French-immersion, middle class youth had an overall framework that allowed them to see the relevance of improvisation and of their own knowledge production and voice in school. If we have learned anything from generations of school ethnography it is about these subtle orientations and dispositions that influence engagement and school success. The working class youth thought that school would work better if things were totally improvisational because finally they were given voice. At the same time they knew this was impossible because they saw school in terms of irrelevance and compulsion. This is their deep critique of a system set up to fail them; they know that most of them can’t (or won’t) compete with the cultural capital of their middle class peers in the testing sweepstakes.

I think by using improvisation as a core curricular metaphor we can open up space for young people who have given up on school while at the same time drawing on ways of working and thinking that are common in marginal social locations. The English stream students used, I would argue, the improvisational acumen they learned from their relatively marginal social context and used it to advantage in our work. This is what the teachers called the “shine” factor or the way that poor or average students surprised their teachers with their work in our project. Making do on the fly is familiar to them, not unlike Paul Harvey’s evocations of “God’s farmers.” This is essentially what Annette Lareau (2003) found in her ethnographic analysis of class practices in child rearing. What working class children learned most effectively is how to be self-motivated and self-directed while middle class children learned how to navigate institutional systems with confidence. The lingering question for me is this: *How can we help marginal students come to believe that their voices, interventions, and improvisations are important in school in the same way that middle class students do?*

### Why is Improvisation so Important Now?

Improvisation as a depiction of teaching is not a new idea. The work of Sawyer (2004, 2011), Erickson (1982), Hallum and Ingold (2007), Farr Darling et al. (2007), Bourdieu (1984, 1992) along with that of and many others in the qualitative sociological tradition more or less explicitly imagine social life as a form of improvisation. It is less common however to encounter curriculum positioned in terms of improvisation. More typically it is presented as a script (Greenfield, 1982). To put things graphically, Edgar Friedenberg (1982) compared curriculum to the plot of a pornographic film. This is, I think, a raw but accurate depiction. The purpose of this plot, and the purpose of curriculum is to, “get the action going” and nothing else really. We are in trouble once we begin to take the plot seriously in itself. The important business of curriculum then is not the script so much as the improvisational activity it stimulates and provokes. Improvisation is what we do and contemporary practice theory from Bourdieu, to ethnomethodology, to symbolic interactionism, to actor network theory all imagine individuals exercising agency within more or less structured environments. Hallam and Ingold remind us that people “are compelled to improvise, not because they are operating *on the inside* (emphasis in original) of an established body of convention, but because no system of codes, rules and norms can anticipate every possible circumstance” (Hallam & Gold, p.2). In the Marxist tradition, as contemporary theorists like Slavoj Žižek (2011) illustrate, the structure of capitalism is distinguished from other historical structures by both the inevitability of struggle and by the particular way that commodification both alienates, activates and forces us to choose in increasingly high stakes and precarious conditions. That is capitalism’s genius: it turns oppression into desire.

Youth today are entering a world that is much more complex than that faced by any previous generation and they do so equipped with ordinary cultural tools like cell phones that are also computers, video cameras and a host of other things. These new tools create new complexity and new opportunities, which call on youth to improvise and construct themselves symbolically from minute to minute in a connected world. It is by now commonplace to claim that young people today need to learn to navigate and evaluate critically the complexity of information that confronts them rather than to assimilate some alleged set of hierarchically arranged core knowledges. Gone are the safe schoolhouses and the good, predictable jobs, neither of which often demanded or tolerated much creativity or flexibility. Gone too are the predictable paths to professional careers and privileged job markets that higher education once assured. Youth today are in the position where they are forced to improvise both their social and their economic lives whether

they want to or not which is perhaps why the paralysis of depression is increasingly common.

For beginning teachers, curriculum has an aura of externality just as it did for the students, it is something that they are expected to “learn” and to “deliver.” The core curriculum questions, “what to teach, to whom and when?” tend to be answered by an appeal to external authority and to official text. Established teachers and parents are also caught up in this matrix (and I am thinking in terms of the film *The Matrix* [Osborne & Wachowski, 1999]). In *The Matrix*, the protagonist Neo is faced with the choice between a blue pill and a red pill, one representing dangerous knowledge and the other representing comfortable conformity. I don’t think it is a case of the blue pill or the red pill. I actually wonder what might have happened if Neo had taken them both. I think the combination of structure and freedom implicit in improvisation might provide a middle path. I also think that rural schools, which are often located in communities that appreciate structure and discipline, but that also harbor strong communal and improvisational traditions in work, music, building, food production, caring for one another, and so forth, are particularly well situated to develop this kind of curriculum.

Following from this point, it is at least a partial lie to suggest to young people that by following rules, behaving predictably and in a uniform fashion, and by memorizing great chunks of scholastic information and performing well on tests, that they will be successful in life. Working class kids have long understood this and middle class youth (including many beginning teachers) who are doubly burdened with the invocation that they follow their passion are starting to figure it out because for many of them it is now also true. Many realize that they are discovering too late that the system is actually not set up to reward conformity and if anything gets rewarded it is innovation and flexibility. But this is not what many of them have been taught in school, particularly those students who come from socially marginal and economically disadvantaged communities, many of which are rural. These are precisely the groups that tend to be targeted for uninspiring, deficit pedagogies. It is not as though standards are irrelevant. Standards are all around us and they represent the structures within which we are invited to create.

The idea of improvisation is well known and well understood in drama, performance, music and particularly in those musical forms like jazz that have developed out of and around vernacular musical forms such as blues, country, rock, rap, gospel, and hip-hop. Improvisation does not imply “anything goes” or an unstructured approach to learning. Structure is what makes improvisation possible and the absence of a formal script to be reproduced actually increases the pressure on the learner to master the genre, its nuances and its classic performances. In his history of

jazz as an improvisational artform, *Thinking in Jazz*, Paul Berliner (1994) demonstrates how the development of this genre proceeds from the structures of folk music through the development of highly competitive and individualistic communities. The tension in that last sentence is deliberate. We tend to think about community as a safe and harmonious space. Berliner focuses however on the responsibility of the jazz neophyte to do the very hard work of listening, playing, and learning in order to “get” the structure of the music. The learner must first of all be trusted to do a lot of risky, exploratory improvisation, an investment best made in youth when time itself tends to be more open and unstructured. This is a prerequisite to developing a voice and the ability to improvise independently. Combining the idea of community with that of personal responsibility and deep investment, Berliner writes:

The value that the jazz community places on personal responsibility is especially appropriate for artistic growth of initiates. Self-reliance requires them to select their own models for excellence and to measure their abilities against them. It enhances the powers of critical evaluation, cultivates their tastes and provides them with an early sense of their own individuality. Overall, the jazz community’s education system sets the students on paths of development directly related to their goal: the creation of a unique improvisational voice within the jazz tradition (1994: 59).

Could we imagine a rural education that sets students on paths of development directly related to the creation of a unique individual voice within the rural tradition? At the same time, rural communities themselves need educated, critical and thoughtful people who can think through the ethics, economics, opportunities and dangers of rurally-based natural resource development initiatives like fracking and aquaculture. They do not need the machismo and atavistically silent simplicity depicted in *God Made a Farmer* where nobody uses technology, nobody reads or discusses, and the only language practices depicted are people saying Grace at the dinner table.

Berliner’s description of the community of autonomous individuals learning to speak to one another is not out of step with a variety of contemporary sociological ideas. Foucault’s ideas on the care of the self (1984) and governmentality (2011) focus on a steady historical shift of responsibility for the construction of identity to individuals who are themselves charged with the personal task of learning about themselves in intimate detail. Zygmunt Bauman’s (1995, 1998, 2000) analyses chronicle the challenges of modern mobile social actors who have largely been cut off from traditions, certainties and place, cast adrift

in a world of strangers forced to choose with highly differential ability to do so in increasingly precarious conditions. As much as many rural educators find this imagery stark, preferring instead more comfortable and comforting communitarian dreams, many rural youth face a future that will require new forms of *métis* cunning (Scott, 1999) and, improvisational resilience not unlike that of their parents. In a sense, there is nothing new here. In rural places life has never been easy for most people and where loss, grieving, and rebirth are all too normal (Kelly, 2009). Whether or not rural schools can tap these crucial funds of knowledge and move on beyond simply grieving may well determine their ultimate success. Indeed, there are positive signs everywhere when school communities collaborate in doing something real in authentic improvisational spaces where the answers are not known in advance.

The decline of certainties and the ability of mass institutions to reproduce predictable results is both liberating and constraining. It is liberating in the sense that Bauman (2008), Anthony Giddens (1990), Ulrich Beck (1992) and the Actor Network theorists (Latour, 2007; Law, 2004) invoke when they argue that contemporary social actors are no longer caught up in tight social reproduction systems where life is set out pretty much according to one’s geographic, cultural, social class, racial or sex/gender designation. At the same time though, having to make one’s own life without clear rules can create insecurity, fear and even paralysis. Our freedom is our life sentence. In Bauman’s (1999) terms, we are doomed to choose and go on choosing whether we like it or not. Or as my friend Cliff Falk (1999) writes, spinning the lifelong learning discourse, we are sentenced to learning for life.

Another way to put this is to say that we are now forced into an improvisational space like that farmer whose horse needs a shoe or a jazz musician working to make a place in a structured but open-ended musical conversation. In a recent book entitled the *Art of Life*, Bauman (2008) writes about how each of us is today compelled to artistically compose a life. The metaphor of a life as an improvised and cosmopolitan artistic composition seems to me to provide interesting possibilities. Our project holds out hope that a new generation of rural students and teachers can help us find an improvised middle ground between structure and creativity if we listen to them.

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