

*Adrian Underhill***1. INTRODUCTION**

Human situations have an element of unpredictability which we may try to reduce or control through rules, regulations, agendas, lists and of course lesson plans. In schools and classrooms, there is usually a syllabus, a certain defined area to study for which materials are produced as a resource, and plans are produced to try to ensure that most of what happens follows the syllabus. So far so good. But in education a problem arises, which is that learning at its best seems to require a quality of creative spontaneity which may not fit well with a tightly prepared plan. If we try to keep the student's learning within the boundaries of the teacher's plan, we may find that we extinguish the vital sparks necessary for engaged learning.

I see teaching as essentially a performance art, co-constructed live and in the moment. This is my experience when I observe other teachers or when I teach a class myself. Of course, we teachers usually have some sort of plan, either on paper or in mind, but the lesson is a living performance, and as it gets going and as the unpredictable starts to occur, so we either choose or are obliged to depart from the plan in order to attend to what needs doing. Thus, the class becomes a living interaction rather than the enactment of a prepared script. This spontaneous interaction is not represented in the plan, in the course book, in the material, nor is it featured in teacher training syllabuses. It may be referred to in supervision discussions, though even then it might be in terms of deviation from the plan or departure from the main lesson, rather than as a singular skill in itself, worthy of eventual mastery. In this way, improvisation largely *escapes being observed, articulated, critiqued or developed*. And while there are probably a good many teachers and academic managers who value and appreciate non-ritual teaching, I think they do not have the necessary ways to name, map and develop the skills of off-plan improvisation. Though improvisation makes up the bulk of most lessons, it does not tick observational boxes and remains elusive. I therefore refer to it as *the dark matter of teaching*. In this article, I discuss this dark matter, that is spontaneous and improvised action, in order to raise questions and make suggestions on how we might prepare for the unexpected, train for the unpredictable, and be more ready and more at ease with the opportunities that present themselves for spontaneous and improvised action.

2. THE LEARNING AGENDA AND THE TEACHING PLAN

There are two sometimes opposed tendencies we can see at work in the classroom that impact on the question of unpredictability and improvisation – one from the learner’s viewpoint and one from the teacher’s. From the learner’s perspective, grappling with what is new to her, she brings to bear her learning faculties and experiences, including curiosity and the capacity to stay in touch with what is still unknown, and at the same time to use what she knows in order to inform her deductions and inductions, hunches and guesses about what might be the case with the language puzzle she is currently in touch with. This is her learning edge, the meeting point between what she knows and what she does not, and the site for her learning moves for which she needs accurate and immediate feedback, whether directly requested or not. This is what I call the learner’s *learning agenda*, of which learners may be partly aware and partly unaware.

The teacher, who has learnt to be watchful can see *some* of this process going on, and can see that although the students are all in the same room and apparently faced with the same learning problem, in fact each student’s learning journey unfolds differently; each is undergoing a different private lesson at the same time as, and in interaction with, the private lessons of all the others. The teacher is not teaching a single group but a *group of private lessons*. To the extent that the teacher can see some of these learner moves he has the opportunity to respond to them individually and uniquely, guided by what the perceived moves tell him about the learner’s need right now, and correspondingly free from his (the teacher’s) usual reliable formulae, free from what worked last time. This is improvisation, the only genuine response that can follow the contours of the learners’ moves. On the other hand, to the extent that the teacher *cannot* see the learning moves, he may refer back to his plan for guidance on what to do next. If he is less inclined or skilled at taking the lead from the learning in front of him, he may default to his lesson plan frequently, or he may rarely stray from it. This is the *teaching plan*, and is in contrast to the *learning agenda*.

If these two tendencies, learning agenda and teaching plan, work together, there may be a positive and synergistic effect where the teacher following his plan usefully assists the learner/s following theirs. That synergy may be a temporary and happy coincidence, or the teacher may be skilled in constantly adjusting his interventions to remain in touch with the learner’s emergent learning agenda. But note that it can work the other way too, as when the teacher stays with his teaching plan, and it is the learner who has to develop the skills to adjust her learning agenda to profit from what is offered by the teacher’s way of working. This learner we might refer to as the compliant learner, or in the poignant language of Transactional Analysis *the well-adjusted learner*.

When teachers leave the teaching plan in order to respond to the learning that is emerging in front of them, they start to improvise. It is this improvisation that enables teachers to respond precisely to the emergent learning agendas in the classroom. And the question is, how can this improvisation be supported by their preparation? If as I am claiming, this improvisation, this dark matter, occupies a significant part of some or all lessons, then we need to find ways to observe, discuss and evaluate it so that we can get better at it. And this would include developing quality criteria for discerning helpful improvisation from

unhelpful. However, our current and received methodology focuses on planning rather than improvisation (see for example University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations CELTA syllabus and assessment guidelines). It is not that training syllabuses are against improvisation, it is just that improvisation does not show up on the methodological radar, so as I have said it remains elusive, an abundant dark matter that we cannot see and so cannot discuss or get better at. So, what can we do about that?

3. INSIGHTS FROM OTHER PERFORMANCE ARTS – JAZZ

Let us take a concrete look at improvisation by going outside our own teaching profession to look at other performance arts where improvisation is both integral and conspicuous, to see how they deal with the unfolding, surprising, shifting, present moment. Two such fields where improvisation is natural, observable, discussed and evaluated are drama and jazz. If you study at drama school, it is likely that from the beginning you will start to develop the skills of improvisation and to work with forms of improvised theatre. Or if you learn to play jazz, you will immediately enter a milieu in which improvisation is articulated, described, conceptualized, critiqued – and highly valued. When I work with teachers, whether experienced or not, I use performance arts such as these as ways of making visible aspects of improvisation to give us new perspectives on our work in the classroom. With this in mind, I might for example show teachers a video of a few minutes of top level jazz improvisation, like a YouTube performance by the two great jazz piano players Count Basie and Oscar Peterson in which they are improvising a slow blues together. (For example see the clip here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3drqJ1bUmEA>). I might preface this by saying that these two pianists had contrasting styles: Peterson was fast, fluent and busy, characteristically playing a large number of well-chosen notes per minute, while Basie was sparse, appearing almost to sculpt the silences between notes with a few beautifully placed and often almost “cheeky” notes, so perfectly timed that they gave an extraordinary swing to the big band that he led. So with that background story I ask: “What is it going to be like when two such different musicians play together? Well for the next few minutes I invite you to notice what is going on in and between the musicians and as you watch and listen to them notice what you see, hear and feel to be going on ... and enjoy it!”, and then I play the video.

After watching this, some of the typical comments from the teachers about the interactions they noted between the musicians include: “... there was eye contact ... they watched each other ... like a conversation ... clearly enjoyed themselves ... pleasure and humour ... really listened to each other ... drew in the audience ... somehow subtly negotiated when to take the lead and when to support the other ...relaxed and alert...” and so on. Now, there are two things that I would like my trainee teachers to see from this. The first is the simple fact that they *can* see and feel and intuit this interaction and negotiation between the improvising musicians. They see that they can see it and they see that such human signalling and co-construction of a present moment is a natural part of their own everyday experience. There is nothing mysterious about it. The second thing that I raise and discuss with them is that in improvisation, there is some kind of *background* structure holding it all together, and a *foreground* in which the spontaneity and interplay is taking

place. The background frames the foreground, providing boundaries and even scaffolding. Improvisation is not just a matter of anything goes. It has its rules too. In this case, the background form of the music is agreed, it is 12 bars long, in 4/4 time, at an agreed tempo, in an agreed key and with an agreed chord sequence, which in this case, is a standard blues progression. Within that simple piece of agreed scaffolding, the musicians provoke and respond to each other, and play together. Play is actually a good word because that is exactly what they do. Many games are like this, there is a fixed structure against which participants play, guided by chance or skill or both. Take soccer as an example, just a couple of basic rules (“work with this team to get the ball down there, and do not touch it with your hands. The other team will do the same in the other direction, and you try to stop each other”) and you get a game that seems to engage most of the global population.

3.1. YOUR LESSON PLAN AND DEPARTING FROM THE SHEET MUSIC

Picture yourself writing a lesson plan. What does the plan do for you? When do you stick to the plan? How? Why? And when do you depart from the plan? How, and how do you know? As I mentioned before, as the unpredictable starts to occur in our lessons, so we depart from the plan to attend to what needs doing. And the class becomes a living interaction rather than the enactment of a script. The same happens when jazz improvisers depart from the sheet music (known to jazz musicians as “the dots”) to create variations on the original melody. They too depart from “the plan”. But they do not do it alone. Their improvisation is in perpetual conversation with the other players. It may help now to consider the different degrees of departure from the sheet music that are possible for an improvising musician. The player may:

1. play the sheet music as it is written (even here no two players will be identical).
2. stretch the sheet music, take little liberties with the dots.
3. add decorations.
4. introduce other notes and rhythms that are more than decoration.
5. develop new melodies, perhaps making reference to the sheet music melody.
6. depart from the sheet melody entirely while retaining the background structure (much jazz takes place around here).
7. depart from the underlying structure too. Let go of the scaffolding. (So called *free* jazz takes place here).

And you can see that this corresponds closely to the degrees of departure that are possible for teachers from the teaching plan.

3.2. WHAT IS QUALITY IN IMPROVISATION?

So far, we have addressed the core notion of making a plan in order to have a ready-made locus of action and to be ready or prepared for some of the possible eventualities, and we have also discussed departure from the plan in order to stay in touch with how the learning spontaneously emerges and to respond to it more usefully. Now, we must look at the

notion of quality in spontaneity and improvisation, because *spontaneous* does not mean *good*, just as *preparation* does not mean *bad*.

In fact, it may be that much preparation is needed for good spontaneity. So how do we recognize quality in the case of improvisation? Once again, practices in jazz are more articulated than in teaching, and may help us. In jazz, the quality questions include:

1. Am I responding to what is actually happening here and now, to what the other musicians are playing and perhaps even to what the audience is doing?
2. Are my interventions and responses helping to build the performance, to serve the group's purpose, to tell a worthwhile story?
3. Am I coming up with variations that are fresh for me, that I have not used before, or at least that are not habitual catch-phrases that I often use, or am I falling back on personal clichés?

Simplifying this further, the dichotomy becomes either: *Do my responses and interventions constitute an intelligent response to what is actually happening here, now, around me in the moment?* I call this *Spontaneity*. Or: *Is what I am doing rather more determined by what I did last time, by my habitual responses and by what I usually do?* This approach I refer to as *Hot Licks*. A hot lick is a musical phrase so often used by a musician that it has become a habitual response, a personal cliché, though it was fresh the first time. In reality, a jazz musician or a language teacher usually operates somewhere between these two poles. While past experience and memory provide some of the raw materials for spontaneity, the teacher/musician needs to be informed by experience, yet not gripped by it.

4. QUALITY IN IMPROVISATION

I suggest that there are two primary skills that both teacher and musician need, and that can both be developed and learnt. The first is knowledge and technique. For the musician, this is knowledge of music and technique on the instrument. And for the teacher, it is knowledge of the language and techniques for teaching it. And the second which I will focus on here is what I call the “Queen” of skills, the ability to listen to, connect with and be guided by what is going on around at the moment. This is a broad-based listening that uses all the senses to be receptive, active and watchful. It is a thoroughly human activity easily capable of development in all of us. And underlying this is the discovery in ourselves that we are already creative improvisers in our lives, as I have hinted above, and to which I will return when I discuss cocktail parties.

So, when discussing what it takes to listen well to our students, I might start with the question: *What do you do while you are listening to your students ... apart from listening...?* Or maybe even, let us pool some of the ways in which we sometimes make a mess of listening to our students. Here, to start the conversation, are six ways to make a mess of listening (all of which I employ!):

1. While listening, I start to prepare my answer and miss the rest of what the speaker says.

2. When I have thought of an answer, I look for a place to insert it ... regardless of where the speaker has got to or whether it is still relevant.
3. I make judgments about the speaker like: “You always say this sort of thing...”, “I wish you would hurry up and make your point...”, etc.
4. I conduct a sort of inner commentary about what is being said.
5. I worry what other class members are thinking, so my listening becomes impatient and my body language subtly begins to say: “Hurry up” rather than “I am understanding you”.
6. I use the listening time for a rest, or to plan my dinner menu or my shopping list or just to daydream.

And so on. And I ask the trainee teachers to add to this list from their own experience. To raise these things with humour and acceptance allows insight into our listening processes and makes possible training and practice in better listening. I will not go into that further here but the work of Rogers, in particular his work in *Freedom to Learn* (1983, 1994), provides an excellent basis for such practice.

5. TRAINING FOR PREDICTABILITY OR UNPREDICTABILITY?

Training generally seems to prefer predictability, while life as it unfolds, even in a classroom, seems to prefer unpredictability. The questions are: *How can pre- and in-service training help us to become more ready to meet the unpredictable? How can we start to make improvisation and spontaneity more visible and more discussible during teacher training and supervision?* Here are four areas of suggestions.

5.1. DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION ON EXPERIENCE

As a starting point for discussion with trainees, I might take a simple situation where people are thrown together with no particular agenda but with basic rules for general behaviour, such as a cocktail party, or whatever might be the equivalent gathering for the teachers in the group. I ask the question: *Before you go to a cocktail party, would you prepare a script of what to say to people at the cocktail party?* and we discuss this. Issues that arise include: the in/advisability and possible outcomes of having such a script, the feeling of being caught with nothing to say. And we discover perhaps that the dichotomy of Spontaneity vs. Hot Licks (see 3.2.) turns out to apply to cocktail parties as well as to jazz and teaching. As we study our experience, we can see how we rely on our listening (the Queen of skills) to connect with what is happening now, and how the act of connecting opens the way to making still more connection, more participation, more meaning ... and connection also opens the way to relevant spontaneity. We are improvising.

Here are six statements designed to trigger reflective discussion and examination of our practice. They are six possible answers to the question: *What is spontaneity?* and each is simply a discussion starter.

- Spontaneity is a response free from habitual reaction.

- It embraces the unknown, rather than reducing the unknown to the familiar.
- It is a way of “dancing” with what is happening now.
- Spontaneity helps protagonists to draw a fresh world into existence in the moment.
- Spontaneity is engaged playfulness. Spontaneity and play are two sides of the same experience.
- Spontaneity is not an effort, not hard work, not a furrowed brow ... when it happens it flows freely.

It is interesting just to invite trainees to google the word *spontaneity* and see where it leads them, inviting them to note anything that bears on their own concerns and practices. Here are quotes from the first two sites this process chanced to lead me to. I have shared these with teachers and also used them as reflective pieces to stimulate self-observation during practice.

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings. (...) Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with reality, and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression (taken from <http://www.memorablequotations.com/spolin.htm>) (Date of access: 8 Apr 2014).

Planning may be necessary in many circumstances but it can also be a hindrance. When a person prepares for an activity they encounter a minute tensing of the muscles and a tightening of the joints. (...) The subtle act of preparation actually reduces your ability to move and slows the body considerably (taken from <http://www.neijia quan.co.uk/Spontaneity.htm>) (Date of access: 8 Apr 2014).

5.2. INCLUDE SPONTANEITY AND IMPROVISATION IN SUPERVISION

Teacher trainers generally say that pre-service training must provide carefully crafted procedures for understanding language and for conducting language classes, that teachers in initial training require strong guidance and scaffolding activities, that beginner teachers have enough to worry about without focusing too much on off-plan eventualities, and that later, with experience, they will be able to make more spontaneous classroom decisions. I understand this, and it seems sensible and responsible, but at the same time it is flawed, because even at entry level teaching the unpredictable is in full swing in every class, and the over-scaffolded trainee teacher simply learns to steam-roller over the unpredictable by sticking firmly to the plan, which, in turn, can stifle natural human response and make teachers behave slightly awkwardly. My own experience is of seeing teachers many years after initial training, who have not recovered their natural poise and ability to improvise in class, though perfectly able to do so in all other social settings (Do they even mistake this “interpersonal clankiness” for a “proper classroom persona”?). I can add too, that of the many classical musicians I know, those who have learnt to play solely by following the

sheet music, albeit to a high standard, have had terrible problems if they try to learn to improvise later.

So to try to counter this, here are some supervision strategies for dealing with the unpredictable that I believe are applicable to pre- and in-service training.

5.2.1. INCLUDE FEEDBACK ON “OFF-PLAN” MOMENTS

When observing teachers’ classes make space in your observation instruments to notice and record attempts at improvisation, and to talk about it as improvisation, as acting in the midst of not-knowing, rather than as uninformed action. Explore, bring to light, make visible the processes of improvising itself, the loss of security, the process of engaging usefully with the unexpected input that a participant brings to the situation. Offer feedback on it, and discuss how to develop it.

5.2.2. LOOK FOR TURNING POINTS IN LESSONS

Look for turning points in lessons, where different things could have happened. Discuss how other things could have happened and how the teacher’s own actions may have extinguished some nascent initiatives and fostered others. This is not to criticize, but to encourage creative speculation. This provocative set of three questions can be useful to have ready at hand to encourage out-of-the-box speculation about alternative scenarios:

1. *What could have happened, and what did?*
2. *What could have happened, but did not?*
3. *What could not have happened, but did?* (i.e. What would you never have predicted, yet it happened?)

5.2.3. PROVOKE UNPREDICTABILITY IN CLASS

One way to do this is to identify your own teaching habits or rules, and then deliberately break one of them. Not because it is better to do so, but because, by doing so, you expose yourself to new situations that hitherto your own “rules have ruled out”. You also force yourself into the reflective space of seeing your actions from outside. Here is an instruction you could give to yourself and to teachers in a development group:

Identify some *rules* or *habits* that you follow in your teaching, things that you *always* or *never* do. Choose a suitable rule or habit and in one lesson per day, and with one class only, try breaking this same rule, doing the opposite or doing it differently. See what happens. Keep experimenting with the same rule, in each lesson, and follow up any promising new leads. Always keep the benefit of your learners in mind, and after each time write yourself a note to catch the feeling of the experiment, using whatever words or images come to mind. Bring the bits of writing with you to a meeting with your colleagues. Compare and discuss. What patterns emerge? What further experiment suggests itself?

This is loosely based on Fanselow's (1989) book *Breaking Rules* (see Fanselow in this volume).

5.3. REFLECT ON METHODOLOGIES WHICH AVOID PRE-PLANNING

5.3.1. SILENT WAY, COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING, DOGME, DEMAND-HIGH

There are a number of less well-known approaches to language teaching in which the teacher aspires to be guided in their facilitation by the learning of the students. In the Silent Way the teacher tries almost to see the learning moves themselves and to respond directly to these moves. In Community Language Learning (CLL) the teacher creates a setting in which learners try to say whatever is of interest or importance to them as people rather than as students, limited only by what they are capable of, not by a syllabus. Neither of these approaches has a conventional syllabus or uses conventional materials. And both require a high degree of teacher rather than lesson preparation, entailing spontaneity and informed improvisation in response to emergent language. (Gattegno, inventor of the Silent Way, said at a workshop in Bristol in 1986: "I prepare myself, not the lesson ...". Maley (2013) contrasts *preparation* with *preparedness*.) And similar things may be said of Dogme, which is likely to make light use of authentic material, and again to depend on what emerges from the learners. The point is that all three approaches have (quite different) background structures against which student and teacher are bound to improvise according to the learning needs of the moment.

Demand-High, which is not a methodology but a set of attitudes, intentions and techniques applicable to almost any methodology, aims to make the highest doable demand on every student at the same time and in the same class by challenging them at their learning edge, and this too requires that the teacher's actions be strongly guided by the students' learning moves in each moment (for more on Demand-High see Scrivener's article in this volume). All four of these approaches require and encourage teacher improvisation.

It follows from what has been said so far that on the continuum from following the learning agenda through to following the teaching plan, the more the teacher wishes to be guided by the former, the more they have to deal with the unpredictable. You cannot predict the learners' inner moves, except very provisionally. As soon as you start to prefer your prediction over the learning reality, you are back with your teaching plan. Plans are fine, but they need to be *non-stick plans*.

5.3.2. STYLES OF FACILITATION

There are other methodologies that are concerned less with teaching and tutoring than with facilitation and enabling. These are process rather than procedure-based, and apply to a wide range of topic areas. Many have developed since the 1950s and 1960s under the major influence of the Person-Centred Approach, originated by Rogers, referred to above. Typically, facilitative approaches focus on the affect, and on the quality of relationship of the learner with herself, with the other learners and with the facilitator. Listening – the

Queen of skills as I have named it – is a core part of any facilitative approach, but it is not just listening that is important, but non-judgmental listening. A feature of this is the capacity for easy, relaxed silence, for not filling spaces with unnecessary words, something that teachers often find difficult.

5.4. THEATRE GAMES AND IMPRO

Theatre-based games and improvisations are used for a variety of purposes outside the theatre. For example, Forum Theatre (Boal, 2000) is used in communities for tackling social issues and rehearsing different responses in difficult situations such as homelessness, drug-addiction and mental health. It is as close as experiential learning can get to the actual setting itself, but in the theatre no harm can be done and people can experiment with multiple approaches and gain confidence in dealing with the difficulties and surprises presented by everyday reality. It is this unpredictability that renders learnt and patterned responses ineffective, and which favours purposeful spontaneity and improvisation as best responses. Such theatre is used in schools in many parts of the world, for example, in learning about health, nutrition, local history or just for the fun and interaction of story-making.

One can attend short introductory courses to impro as I did for two days in London early in 2014. Participants, typically from all walks of life other than acting, are there because they feel that confidence in improvisation would help them professionally. The course I attended and others like it draw on the work of, amongst others, Johnstone (1981), who has been one of the key proponents of impro in the UK and Canada over the last few decades. Three of the core guiding practice ideas for impro are:

1. Learn to accept the “offer” made by the fellow improviser. In other words, when improvising one should build on rather than reject or ignore what a fellow actor comes up with. By going with the initiative of another, you invite co-creation.
2. Liberate your own spontaneity by going with your first idea. In impro, all responses are equal until explored. This is the setting where risks are key to success. As musician Miles Davis said: “Do not fear mistakes – there are none”.
3. The idea of accepting the offer is akin to saying *yes* as a first move – it is saying let us create something together. In terms of good listening, it is like actually hearing what someone is saying without one’s own judgment or distortion entering in, so that one can respond to the other as they are. Working with what the other musicians are playing is also the essence of jazz. In the classroom, I interpret the idea of the offer as equivalent to the learning move that the learner is engaged with at that moment and which they are making public by their internal action (pause, recall, expression e.g. look of engagement or moment of insight) and externally (saying something, making a mistake, asking a question, looking at a resource), and which I can either go with and create something new, or ignore, or reject.

6. CONCLUSION

My argument is straightforward. The unpredictable is always happening in the lesson and is one sign that learning is taking place. To use the information, direction and energy of learning initiatives is crucial to responsive teaching; this requires the teacher to be in the process of developing skill and confidence in improvisation. This is not generally part of teacher preparation and development, but it should be. And I have suggested broad areas in which this dark matter of teaching can be made visible, discussible and improveable. Finally, I would like to leave readers with seven tips for improvisation and working with the unpredictable. These are the tips I try to give myself:

1. Bother less about trying to control, encourage connectivity.
2. Work with what is happening, rather than with what you wish was happening.
3. Start conversations about whatever matters to whoever is there.
4. Give up trying to be interesting, and simply reach out and connect.
5. Make plans but do not expect them to work out. Value/welcome the unexpected.
6. Increase intuition: follow hunches, be vulnerable, risk fear, leave gaps, be messy, hang loose, welcome and use the energy of student spontaneity.
7. See the classroom and whole school as an adventure park for *your learning*. See yourself as an improviser.

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