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# DEMOCRACY, IMPROVISATION, AND SCHOOLING REFORM

## Abstract

Experience from two decades of schooling reform work provide lessons in a least five critical areas: schooling structure, pedagogy, politics, ideology, and partnerships involving universities and schools. This paper explores and explicates these issues in the specific contexts of public school reform and restructuring. It raises the concept of interdependence as one key goal for reform efforts that employ collaborative and democratic practices among schools, universities, and community partners.

## Abstrakt

Doświadczenia z pracy w reformowaniu szkolnictwa przez ostatnie dwie dekady pozwalają na wyciągnięcie wniosków dotyczących pięciu istotnych obszarów: struktury, nauczania i uczenia się, strategicznego zarządzania, ideologii i partnerstwa między szkołami i uniwersytetami. W artykule bada się i wyjaśnia te zagadnienia w specyficznym kontekście reformowania i restrukturyzacji szkoły publicznej. Podnoszona jest koncepcja współzależności jako jednego z kluczowych celów prób reformowania, które bazują na współpracy i demokratycznej praktyki między szkołami, uniwersytetami i partnerami w lokalnych społecznościach.

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the concept of collaboration in urban schooling reform in the United States as it relates to democratic theory and practice, situated within a social, political, cultural climate marked by diversity, rapid change, and shifting conceptions of knowledge production and use. Put simply, we are interested in how a reconceived concept of democracy might work in collaborative educational reform efforts in the United States. Our work in this regard

is made even more complex and critical, given increasing globalization. We contend that collaboration as currently conceived and practiced in urban schooling reform in the U.S. is rooted in a consensus model of social interaction, where consensus is sought through rational inquiry, public discourse, and the free exchange of ideas. While globalization does not rule out the use of such processes, they are nonetheless in need of inspection. Their unquestioned use tends to ignore the tensions and points of contestation that arise as diverse groups with often conflicting cultures, interests, values, and positions of power work to construct public education in their own image(s). Given such a reality, consensus models of collaboration are not only simplistic, but also potentially misleading. Further, democratic collaboration in education tends to focus on the political/procedural aspects of democracy and treats the democratic process primarily as a means to some greater end (the "reconstructed" school). We think that a great deal more may be gained by exploring the pedagogical possibilities of democracy and treating it more as an end in itself, or, put more accurately, as a site where means and ends collapse into one another.[1] We believe that such a means/ends collapse may be found in other, more non-traditional sources of democratic, collaborative activities grouped here as forms of collective improvisation in the arts. We will explore briefly three such sources of artistic collective improvisation – in jazz, dance, and writing – in an effort at reconfiguring educational collaborations. We will follow that exploration in the improvisational arts with a side venture into the realm of labor negotiations in the agriculture industry in the Midwest United States. We make this rather abrupt shift to highlight what we think is a very clear example of the value of emphasizing interdependence across difference rather than consensus building. Our hope is to use all these excursions to begin to conceptualize and practice democracy differently in the complex arena of public school reform.

## Collective Improvisation and Free Jazz

Collective improvisation is the essence of Dixieland style jazz – the three lead instruments (horns) improvise contrapuntal melodies above the steady beat of the rhythm section. There are particular patterns and formulas they follow. During collective improvisation, each musician knows when to take the lead and when to allow someone else to come to the fore, resulting in a dynamic and organic on--the-spot composition.[2] The composition is spontaneous, yet it also has form and structure and adheres to a theme.

Free jazz, one form of collective improvisation, is credited to Ornette Coleman and arose in the 1950s and 1960s. There are four basic elements to free jazz,

[1] J. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, Macmillan, New York 1916.

[2] D.D. Megill and R.S. Demory, *Introduction to Jazz History*, Prentice Hall, Inglewood Hills, NJ 1984, p. 52.

which covers a wide range of music styles and sounds.[3] The first element is tone color, which is a structural element. An example is found in Coleman's white plastic saxophone, which allowed him to create sounds that were more nasal and shallow than those from a metal instrument. He appeared to have an "out of tune approach" to melody.

The second element is a new emphasis placed on collective improvisation, where all the musicians were called upon to actively solo together. Harmonies and melodies were improvised. According to Berendt,[4]

> ...released from the unifying framework of a predetermined harmonic sequence, [Coleman's] solos unfold with an inner logic which never loses its ability to surprise. One thought springs from another, is re-expressed, transformed and leads to yet another. But the details of this process often approach the simplicity of a folk song and only knit when brought together in a complex structure.

As a third element, ensemble involves the abolition of the traditional roles of soloist and accompanist. All performers were free to play at any time they desired and could add sounds, rhythms, and so on to complement what was being created. The performers, however, had to decide what and when to play. Don Cherry, another musician that played with Coleman, suggested that in this style of jazz there was a kind of love and communication achieved that was reminiscent of African rhythms where communication is "more important than the music."[5]

Fourth and finally, this new kind of music allowed for a questioning of traditional rules of music, which led to a "revised ordering of musical priorities. The free jazz musician does not abandon tradition, he (sic) leans on it, especially on the blues."[6] In other words, the elements of free jazz are not random and bereft of older jazz styles and traditions. Indeed, collaborators rely upon one another and have confidence in the ensemble's mastery of a multiplicity of musical skills.

## Contact Improvisation in Dance

Elements of collective improvisational and free jazz can be found in some forms of modern dance, also. According to Cynthia Novack, contact improvisation is a dance form that was developed in 1972 and was most popular in the mid to late 70s and is still practiced by many.[7]

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[3] D.D. Megill and R.S. Demory, op.cit.

[4] Ibidem, p. 172.

[5] Ibidem.

[6] Ibidem, p. 173.

[7] C.J. Novack, *Sharing the dance: Contact improvisation and American culture*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI 1990.

> ...people doing contact improvisation create a dance through collaborative interaction, basing their improvisation on the physical forces of weight and momentum. The dancers are supposed to be absorbed in experiencing the movement and sensing (largely through touch) the experience of their partners; in order to allow momentum to develop, dancers have to keep their energy freely flowing, abandoning self-control in favor of mutual trust and interaction[8].

Contact improvisation emerged in response to aspects of social and political conditions and was seen as a way of teaching "people how to live (to trust, to be spontaneous and 'free,' to 'center' oneself, and to 'go with the flow."[9] Many suggest that it was a "model of and model for an egalitarian, spontaneous way of life."[10]

Some basic elements of contact improvisation, according to Novack, are first, that movement is generated by "changing points of contact between bodies."[11] Through these changing points of contact dancers find "a mutual spatial pathway for movement through the interaction of body weight" and "exchange of support."[12] As a result, dancers rely on sensory messages through touch, using all body surfaces to maintain contact with another dancer and provide mutual support of one another's weight. Dancers develop an internal sense of movement that allows them to respond to subtle shifts in other dancers and to be more confident in taking risks and "intentionally project their bodies into the surrounding space."[13]

Like improvisational jazz musicians, contact improvisers also tend to "emphasize continuity of movement without knowing exactly where the movement will take them."[14] The performance itself was very informal in terms of props, staging, and costumes and it often involved the audience, with dancing going on as the audience was arriving and thereby making indefinite the beginning of the performance and blurring the line between audience and dancers. Further, dancers used natural stances and movements, avoided traditional dance techniques and structured choreography, and allowed natural and spontaneous movements and actions (e.g. coughing, scratching) to occur as well. Finally, everyone was viewed as being equally important, as no dancers were designated as primary or "leads" and others "support cast." All supported (literally and figuratively) one another.

In both dance and in jazz we find metaphors of collective, collaborative practice that are quite different from the forms of democratic practice typically invoked in the theory and practice of collaborative educational endeavors. A third potential source for artistic metaphors for educational collaboration is in the area of collective writing experiments.

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[8] C.J. Novack, op.cit., p. 105.
[9] Ibidem.
[10] Clifford, cited in: C.J. Novack, op.cit., p. 105.
[11] Ibidem.
[12] Ibidem, p. 115.
[13] Ibidem.
[14] Ibidem.

## Collective Improvisation and Writing

Because of the opening up in the late twentieth century of the former Soviet Union to the West for trade, both in the economic and in the intellectual/cultural arenas, Russian intellectuals began to explore how to exist outside of a their own particular culture(s) and negotiate a space of being on the border of existing cultures. Mikhail Epstein suggests that in order to do so one must develop a "transcultural vision" marked by humility and awareness that, while specific cultures are valuable and offer important insights, they are nonetheless limited. He therefore stressed a cultural awareness that in many ways is in opposition to many western multicultural perspectives that emphasize building cultural pride and its individual counterpart, self-esteem.[15]

One method for exploring such cultural insights and limitations, both within individual cultures and among differing cultures, is through a form of collective improvisational writing experiment. In brief, Epstein's writing experiments begin with several writers generating a list of possible topics on which to write. Typically, these topics are related to common life experience, and once the list is generated each participant discusses why her/his topic might merit exploration. The participants then vote to choose a topic and, once that is done, suggest facets of the topic about which each participant might then write. The actual writing phase lasts anywhere from one to several hours and is followed by a reading of each participant's composition. After each reading, the group asks questions of the writer and suggests areas where the author might make revisions and deepen the contents of the text. The final phase is a re-writing and compilation of the various texts into a collective exploration of the topic that can then be used by interested people for further study, for insights into creative approaches to related problems, and for examples of creative activity.

In these experiments, Epstein suggests that improvisation means to create unpredictably. It involves a form of creativity, but not creativity in the individualistic sense. He suggests that improvisation is creativity through communication. The communication is different than the typical you say something you know and we respond back with something we know. The improvisation is creativity that occurs "in the process of communication not before or out of communication."[16] In improvisation the communication deals more with the unforeseen, the unknown, because the improvisation proceeds from the otherness of another person.

The improviser creates something different from what she ever imagined because she is creatively surrounded by the others. I take the position of surprise toward myself and transcend myself because I am the "other" for the others. The improviser exercises a greater force of transcendence as compared with the

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[15] M. Epstein, *After the future: The paradoxes of postmodernism and contemporary Russian culture*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, MA 1995.

[16] M. Epstein, Unpublished paper presented at BGSU symposium, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1996, p. 10.

solitary armchair thinker. The consciousness of other people and the discovery of otherness in one's own consciousness are the two mutually stimulating and accelerating processes in improvisation.[17]

The collective improvisation that Epstein is discussing is different from professional improvisations or improvisations that are presented to an audience. Here the improviser is performing and the audience often plays a passive role. The collective improvisation that he and his colleagues engaged in required that each participant enter a reciprocal relationship of questioning and answering to all others.[18] He suggests that these are aspects of contemporary collective improvisation that must include the aesthetics or creativity of individuals along with the aesthetics/creativity of commonness. They must involve a

> totality of individuals united in order to create meta-individual texts. That is why contemporary improvisations have a necessarily written character. In front of the paper or computer screen a person experiences the full measure of his individual responsibility as a creator. Without writing, improvisation will result in the process of conversation, which is pure communication. Creative communication must incorporate moments of privacy, isolation, solitariness into the process of unification.[19]

The presence of the other people intensifies the process of thinking, since each word that one is writing is the final, and the improvisational process itself is realized as its own result. The creative responsibility grows, as the creation is concentrated in the given moment of time and space. Those thoughts that are generated through improvisation perhaps could never occur if each participant had been working alone in his or her office.

Our exploration of collective artistic improvisations has taken us far in our effort to reconstruct our imaginings of democratic practice in educational reform. We have seen the importance of spontaneity within structure, the constant changing of leader and follower, the reliance of each on the rest, the blurring and eliding of process and product, and the role of on-going critique and feedback, to mention just a few elements that might translate to our schooling reform context. However, we are not yet convinced that these examples embody a clear enough illustration of the practice of democracy amidst conflicting subject positions and interests. We need to introduce another framework of collaboration, one developed in the contentious and conflict ridden arena of seasonal/migrant labor in the agriculture industry. We believe that the working relationship among the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), growers, and corporate food processors has much to tell us about complex partnerships, education, and social change. We chose the farm labor context because it involves an exceedingly complex array of socioeconomic issues and interests, some of which are highly conflicting. Further, it is a context within which at least three different parties – farm

[17] Ibidem.
[18] M. Epstein, op.cit.
[19] Ibidem, p. 12.

workers, growers, and food processors – came to recognize their interdependence in spite of their differences in relation to economic, social, and educational development. We believe that examining a collaboration constructed out of this complexity can help us to reconstruct collaborative efforts in schooling reform. And that create opportunities to learn about our interconnectedness despite even fundamental differences and value conflicts.

What follows is a brief discussion of the farm labor context that led to a historic multiparty partnership/agreement created by FLOC and aspects of the partnership that might inform our thinking in reforming schools. We highlight the simultaneous presence of conflict and interdependence, characteristics of the eventual partnership that arose out of that conflict and interdependence, and educational opportunities that emerged from enacting and living the partnership. We draw our summary from Barger and Reza (1994) and are deeply indebted to their analysis.

## Farm Labor Contract Negotiations

In the history of labor practices employing migrant workers in agriculture, corporate food processors such as Heinz, Campbell, and Libby Foods contracted with individual growers for their crops, and growers contracted with farm workers to cultivate and harvest those crops. The profits of the growers were dependent on getting a high enough price from food processors to compensate for paying workers and providing for their housing during the cultivating and harvesting season. Since food processors typically preset prices, the only option left for growers was to minimize their own costs by keeping wages and housing costs as low as possible. As a result, farm workers looked to growers as the main source of both their income and their difficulties. Growers in turn found themselves caught between workers and corporate food processors. Yet, all three groups were mutually dependent on the viability of the industry as a whole and had an interest in its continued operation in the region. Conflicts became so intense, however, that the existence of the industry in the Midwest U.S. was threatened.

As a result, FLOC called on farm workers, growers, and corporate food processors to convene to address working and living conditions. Resistance by growers and processors, coupled with a history of farm worker abuse, precipitated a strike in 1978 against Campbell and Libby tomato operations, the most visible companies in the Midwestern United States. The strike was coupled in 1979 with a nationwide boycott of Campbell and Libby products and lasted until 1986, when FLOC signed a three-year contract with the corporations and their growers.

This historic multiparty agreement, orchestrated by Baldemar Velasquez, President of FLOC, was created to insure equal participation and mutual benefit in the agricultural enterprise. According to all three parties, changes arising from this partnership arrangement have had significant impact on their socioeconomic and educational needs. Workers have reported how this agreement has helped

them learn to enhance productivity, increase pay, and help make farms more profitable. They also gained greater appreciation for concerns and difficulties of growers and processors by working in partnership with them. Growers, initially fearful of the agreement's effect on farm profitability, found that higher wages and improved working and living conditions actually increased their profits. Food corporations also reported the value of this agreement to their own existence and viability in the Midwest.[20]

We have, then, an actual collaborative venture that has enhanced economic development through recapitalizing an industry for an entire region of the U.S. Further, this economic development was wedded to social improvement and educational opportunities, in that the agreement provided a structure within which people could learn how to live together more democratically. What is critical for us here is what is learned in the process of living by and through the multiparty agreement. With the emphasis on equal participation and mutuality of interests, participants must learn where their conflicting subject positions intersect, where all parties recognize their interdependence and become conscious of their stake in making changes. The FLOC multiparty agreement provided the structure and opportunity to see these intersecting interests in a way that is not quite so clear in our examples of artistic improvisations. Yet, the agreement, like the improvisations, does reflect more than a procedural means to resolving labor/management problems. It was and is also an end in itself, a way of living democratically that promotes growth and learning in all of its participants.

## Partial Endings

How does reflecting on the practice of collective improvisation in the arts and in labor negotiations help us to theorize collaboration as democratic practice in ways that take into consideration the complexities of an increasingly global context? First, the process of collaborating democratically is not separate from the product of that collaboration. The art produced (music, dance, or literary composition) is part and parcel of the process. We are compelled by these metaphors and see the need for this same collapse of means and ends in the functioning of democratic schools. The reforming of schools around democratic principles requires, we believe, the on going living of those principles. And in living democratically, we learn to live and work together, not without difference and conflict, but across difference and conflict. Second, while consensus may indeed be an episodic result of the process, it is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for the process to go forward. What we feel is a more compelling condition than consensus is gaining an awareness of mutuality and interdependence. The jazz musicians need one another to make music, the dancers need one another for the

[20] W.K. Barger and E.M. Reza, *The farm labor movement in the midwest: social change and adaptation among migrant farmworkers*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1994.

dance, and the writers need respondents to produce the collective composition. Workers, growers, food corporations, and those of us whose lives depend on their productive enterprise, could not live without one another. Universities, schools, community groups, parents, and non-governmental organizations all have multiple interests in and images of schooling. We believe that developing and deepening our conscious awareness of interdependence can be a guiding force in helping us live democratically in and out of school.

We have been working for over two decades in democratic school reform, and our thinking and acting through shifting conceptualizations and metaphors of democracy are continually being revised. We feel strongly that our own work is enhanced, deepened, and has greater impact on U.S. schools as a result. The work and experience coming out of the recent conference bringing us together with Polish educators at Jagellonian University this past fall is exciting because we may now use these ideas with European colleagues to collaborate democratically across our differences in history, culture, and context.

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