

Open-Mindedness, Improvisation, and the Interplay Between Reason and Emotion

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It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to respond to Susan Verducci's important essay on the educational value of improvisation and to engage in a dialogue about its theme. Verducci advocates the practice of improvisation in order to cultivate openness. According to her argument, openness can be conceptually linked to the widely accepted educational aim of open-mindedness. Her point of departure is that "when considering cultivating open-mindedness in schools, most theorists . . . focus on developing critical reasoning skills and shaping contexts in which open-mindedness can flourish," whereas "more needs to be said about openness in the light of significant obstacles to its development, especially the obstacles of strong and committed beliefs and human perceptual limitations such as cognitive biases and perceptual blindness." I fully agree with her on this, and I am also sympathetic to her idea that improvisation can be a promising way to promote this important educational aim.

In what follows, I first add another perspective to this theme — the sufficient interplay between reason and emotion as an important feature of an open-minded person — and discuss the author's suggestion from this viewpoint. I conclude that improvisation seems to be a promising pedagogical method for cultivating this interplay. I then shift my perspective to the philosophy of science and discuss the limits of the philosophical argument for articulating the benefits of improvisation.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN REASON AND EMOTION IN OPEN-MINDEDNESS

As Verducci writes, a number of significant obstacles to the development of open-mindedness "work outside conscious awareness and control, and function to narrow, distort, divert or close off openness." This is one of the main reasons that the mere promotion of critical thinking skills is not sufficient for open-mindedness. Open-mindedness requires the admission and tolerance of one's own vulnerability and fallibility.¹ Otherwise, cognitive and rational abilities, often taken to be crucial to one's ability to think critically and to revise one's belief system, may also work toward a contrary end — specifically, they may assist one in constructing an illusion of one's own certainty and infallibility.

In my view, an important perspective here is the question of how cognitive and emotional dimensions work together in a mature personality and how problems in this regard can be damaging to genuine open-mindedness. Antonio Damasio's wide-ranging work has demonstrated that the absence of emotions produces clear deficits in rational thinking, and that the connection between reason and emotion is essential for adequate reasoning.² For example, the tendency to avoid emotional discomfort can lead to "rationalization," the process in which the reasons one gives for one's actions are not real but are instead based on self-deception.³ Such pseudo-justification (rationalization) is easier for a person with good critical thinking skills.

That is to say, one's own rationalizations in response to difficulties in accepting or interpreting emotions can distort one's interpretations.

How, then, might we understand improvisation from this perspective? It seems improvisation may involve the potential to experience situations in which one feels emotionally insecure — where one faces one's own vulnerability and fallibility — in a relatively safe way, which resembles play more than being threatened by unfamiliar and, thus sometimes intimidating, ways of thinking. In the best case, this experience helps one to understand that controlling a situation in order to keep it as familiar as possible is not always the best strategy and that being open to new ideas — although emotionally uncomfortable — can also be interesting, productive, and even enjoyable.

In comparison with other proposed solutions to the problem of rationalization, I see improvisation as a particularly promising idea because it can be carried out in schools. For example, Martha Nussbaum sees the psychoanalytically-oriented conceptions of emotional life in early childhood as important for genuine critical thinking and empathy. In her analysis drawing on Donald Winnicott, the primitive emotions of shame and disgust are mutated — in order to preserve one's own psychological balance and comfort — into negative emotions directed at those who are different from one's own group of reference. Even if we accept that the psychoanalytical approach is reliable, it is still difficult to see how it would be possible to affect these kinds of early childhood processes in schools. From this viewpoint, improvisation has more applicability

In practice, one must ask to what extent improvisation provides equal opportunities to all participants and whether there are still dangers of exclusion, of experiencing not being accepted, and, consequently, of discovering that living in the moment — in the sense of openness — is not safe after all.

THE LIMITS OF PHILOSOPHY

Verducci makes it clear that she does not claim that improvisation as such cultivates open-mindedness; her argument is “that free and collective improvisation requires an opening of its players, the sort of opening relevant for those of us concerned with cultivating open-mindedness in classrooms.” She states that she has built her case “by forging conceptual connections between improvisation and the ‘openness’ required by open-mindedness.” In my view, she has done this successfully.

However, one question is still left open: How much can conceptual connections actually tell us about the real relationship between improvisation, openness, and open-mindedness? In the final analysis, whether improvisation advances openness and, indirectly, open-mindedness, is an empirical question. Verducci does not deny this, and she may be saying that these conceptual connections give us sufficient reason to hypothesize about this relationship, promote this idea for classrooms, and perhaps later find empirical evidence of it.

To be clear: I do not claim that these connections should be tested empirically before bringing improvisation into the classroom. This would not make sense, since most of today's teaching practices have not been, and perhaps even cannot be, tested empirically. What I am saying is that it would be self-deceptive to declare that a

philosophical argument could prove that the practice of improvisation in classrooms advances openness or open-mindedness, because, as an empirical question, it is outside the realm of philosophy. Still, the role of philosophy in this matter is more than important. I only wish to point out that cooperation and dialogue between philosophers and empirical researchers is necessary if we are to solve these kinds of fundamental educational problems. For such dialogical work, I would suggest using John Dewey's approach of defining education from the dynamic perspective of the process of growth.

In conclusion, I repeat my conviction that education for open-mindedness is one of the most important educational themes of our time and that improvisation may be a good way to promote the spirit of open-mindedness in students. I look forward to continuing the conversation.

1. Ann Chinnery, "On Epistemic Vulnerability and Open-Mindedness" in *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Chris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014): 63–64; Katariina Holma, "The Fallibilist Pluralism and Education for Shared Citizenship," *Educational Theory* 62, no. 4 (2012): 397–399.

2. Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Papermac, 1996); Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

3. Robert Audi makes a distinction between rationalization (giving reasons that are not the real ones) and explanation (giving the real reasons) in *Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 131–156. In the field of educational research, Kaisu Mälkki has argued that the unconscious aim of avoiding uncomfortable emotions in learning is an obstacle to critical reflection; see Kaisu Mälkki, "Building on Mezirow's Theory of Transformative Learning: Theorizing the Challenges to Reflection," *Journal of Transformative Education* 8: 1 (2010): 42–62.