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Introduction

Abstract: Cognitive studies, including philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience, is often alluded to when describing theatrical improvisation. This book aims to explicitly connect them by looking at Viola Spolin, Del Close, and Keith Johnstone’s theories and teaching, interviewing professional improvisers, and using recent findings in cognitive studies in order to explore the effects improv has on consciousness and cognition.

In college, I was part of a very close-knit improv team. We practiced, performed, and partied together. During a few performances, I seemed to get so “into the show” that I did not remember performing. I had, and still have, no recollection of being onstage. The shows were all videotaped, and when we watched the tapes I was amazed at how good I was at improvising. Yet, I still had no memory of being that guy on the video. The unique rules, structure, and skill-set required for improv affected my mind differently than when I performed in plays or when I was experiencing my everyday college life.

This personal experience set me on the path toward writing this book, which starts with the broader hypothesis that the difference between “as if for the first time” and “for the first time” changes the way an actor thinks, reacts, and performs. It changes how the performer’s mind functions. This, as a result, changes the very quality of a performance. This book does not argue that all performances should be improvised; most would fail terribly, the dreaded downside of the art form. It does, however, begin with the idea that a look into how various improvised acting techniques can affect consciousness and cognition can give valuable insights into creating lively, engaging theatre while also expanding our understanding of the mind more generally. The question is, “How does theatrical improvisation affect consciousness and cognition?” To answer that question I look at the teaching and writing of Viola Spolin, Del Close, and Keith Johnstone and compare their theories to those of recent cognitive studies. My focus is on the cognitive processes and possibilities of improvisation, not just a general theory. This book aims to uncover what Viola Spolin, Del Close, and Keith Johnstone intended for their teaching, what actually ends up happening to their practitioners while improvising, and finally, what current cognitive studies can add to our understanding of these improvisation teachers and their methods.

Improvisation continues to grow in popularity. Theaters and schools are popping up all over New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles in addition to smaller cities all over the United States and the world. In recent years, psychologists, social workers, counselors, psychoanalysts, corporate trainers, and other professionals have begun incorporating improvisation into their own practices. This has been happening in the hopes that improvisation’s unique structure and effects on consciousness and cognition will help those professionals better communicate with and help their students and patients. This book will begin to explain what those
unique structures and effects are that make improvisation so beneficial to its practitioners and the way their minds work.

The history of improvisation has been written a few times, sometimes quite thoroughly, but consciousness and what goes on in the brain during improvisation is always alluded to without ever being explained. Frost and Yarrow's *Improvisation in Drama* (2007) casts a wide net by defining improvisation in broad terms. Their exploration includes System-based rehearsals, psychodrama, and even the work of Brecht. One conclusion of these histories is that improvisation is an integral part of even scripted drama. David Charles's dissertation *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity* (2003) also interprets improvisation in broad terms by including Grotowski, Boal, and psychodrama. These two histories are far-reaching and extremely thorough; they explore various cultures and modes of improvisation. In *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City* (2001), professor in theatre and dance Amy Seham uses a narrower scope to analyze Chicago-based improv comedy that comes out of the work of Neva Boyd and Viola Spolin as well as Keith Johnstone's theatresports-based improv. Her focus, though, is on the social implications of Chicago improv's "boys' club."

All three histories are important and drop hints and clues about improvisation's effects on consciousness and cognition that this book picks up and explores more deeply. References to consciousness, transformations, altered states of mind/consciousness, presence, and deep listening abound in writing about improvisational theatre. For example, the question of what makes a self comes up when Viola Spolin writes:

> In present time a path is opened to your intuition, closing the gap between thinking and doing, allowing you, the real you, your natural self, to emerge and experience directly and act freely, present to the moment you are present to.¹

Spolin often uses terminology that invokes cognitive neuroscience, but since cognitive studies is a relatively new discipline, her pioneering theories are based more on her own personal experience and intuition.

Johnstone's work is even more laced with references to consciousness and merits a much closer look (especially his mask work and altered consciousnesses). Johnstone talks about his students as utterly distinct from the masks they wear during his mask exercises. For example, he writes about the Mask¹ learning to speak. When the student takes off the mask, she is right back to the state of mind she had pre-mask donning.
The Mask stops developing and learning once the student takes it off as well. If the Mask had learned to say simple vowel sounds during one session that is where it will pick up during the next session. How can this be explained? Do improvisers have multiple minds or selves?

So when I could not remember having performed an improv show, when Spolin talks about improv unlocking the real person, when Johnstone’s Masks seem to act on their own accord, separate from the “consciousness” of the improviser, what is really going on? What is happening differently when an actor solves problems, figures things out, or makes decisions for the first time in front of an audience (this book’s definition of improvisation) instead of reenacting as if for the first time? This is a slightly different sense of improv than Seham’s definition of Chicago-style improv comedy:

unscripted performance that uses audience suggestions to initiate or shape scenes or plays created spontaneously and cooperatively according to agreed-upon rules or game structures, in the presence of an audience—frequently resulting in comedy. It is usually performed by small groups of players who often develop strong bonds and relationships as a result of their work together.

Seham’s definition of Chicago-style improv has many key elements important to all forms of improv. There should be audience interactivity, spontaneous creation among a cohesive group of players, and agreed-upon rules and structures for playing in order for the performance to be considered improvised.

Ellen W. Veenstra also starts with Seham’s definition of improv in her dissertation, *Improvisational Theater and Psychotherapy: A New Model* (2009). She then gets more detailed by further dividing improvisation into scenes, games, and exercises and short-form, long-form, and sketches with the help of theatre arts professor Jeanne Leep’s book *Theatrical Improvisation: Short Form, Long Form, and Sketch-based Improv* (2008). Veenstra and Leep’s categorization and clarification are important. Veenstra writes that “a *scene* is typically a few minutes long, and any observer would be able to clearly see who the characters are, where they are, and what they are doing.” A game is different than a scene because the focus is on the solving of the problem or objective, and as soon as the problem is solved the game is over. The definition of game changes slightly in long-form improvisation. There the game of a scene is some quirk or pattern that can be repeated and heightened. If a character
laughs after another person says something serious the game of the scene could be one person saying sadder and sadder things and the other laughing harder and harder. Finally, an exercise’s purpose is to improve a skill during a rehearsal or warm-up and not to solve a problem or create characters, places, and actions with a beginning, middle, and end.6

Sketch-based improvisation, such as that done by Second City, is when “improvisers perform scenes, pick out the best scenes, rework them, test them again in performance, and then eventually write them down as finished pieces.”7 Sketch-based improv can use improvisation to create scripted scenes. These scenes can be classified as improvised if the actors still make choices, on the spot, in front of the live audience. Sketch-based improv could also just as easily become completely scripted without any room for improvisation during the final performance. Veenstra derives her definition from Leep, defining a short-form improv show as “usually comprised of several short scenes, each based on a different suggestion, each based on a different game structure, and each with predetermined improvisers.”8 The best-known example of this are the British and American television shows Whose Line Is It Anyway? Long-form shows, on the other hand, are anywhere from twenty to ninety minutes and are completely improvised. Short-form scenes or games can be used to create a long-form show. The thing that makes it distinct from short-form is that there are connections between scenes. These connections can be thematic or narrative, loose or direct.

Cognitive neuroscientists are still discovering and explaining what consciousness is and is not. This book begins with the basic understanding that anything in consciousness is knowingly thought or experienced. Neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran’s description of blindsight in The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Quest for What Makes Us Human (2011) complicates this basic understanding:

Weizkrantz [the doctor] told him [Gy, patient with brain damage] to reach out and try to touch a tiny spot of light that he told Gy was to the right. Gy protested that he couldn’t see it and there would be no point, but Weizkrantz asked him to try anyway. To his amazement, Gy correctly touched the spot.9

Ramachandran goes on to describe blindsight, which is seeing without being conscious of that seeing. The ability to see is generally thought to be a conscious effort, so “How can a person locate something he cannot see? The answer lies in the anatomical division between the old and new
The pathway in the brain that allows seeing is different than the one that allows the perception of sight. In Gy’s case, he was unaware that he could perceive the spot in front of him; therefore he was not conscious of perception. It could be said though that he could see the spot, since he was able to point to it. Blindsight then would be unconscious seeing according to this book’s definition of consciousness thus far. Another example Ramachandran uses for this unconscious seeing is when one zones out during a long drive on the highway or while driving a very familiar route. Clinical psychologist Zoltan Torey refers to conscious awareness as reflective awareness. Torey’s reflective awareness is what this book will refer to as consciousness, when people knowingly think and experience. This distinction between conscious and unconscious perception is integral to this project’s analysis of improvisation and cognition. Throughout this book, many scholars’ theories about conscious versus unconscious perception and problem solving will be used, since improvisation often requires performers to speak and act before being reflectively aware of it.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio also makes a distinction between core consciousness and extended or autobiographical consciousness. For Damasio, core consciousness is “the sense of the here and now, unencumbered by much past and by little or no future.” This is an instinctual consciousness that all sentient beings have. Extended consciousness though “manifests itself most powerfully when a substantial part of one’s life comes into play and both the lived past and the anticipated future dominate the proceedings.” This is the kind of consciousness that incorporates learning and identity. His distinction will be helpful to describe improvisation, an activity that relies heavily on core consciousness or “being in the moment” as improvisers say.

For this book’s purposes, the distinction that Ramachandran’s blindsight case study provides is perhaps the most valuable. In improvisation, much of the discussion involves intuition and awareness, so the dichotomy raised by blindsight is a good starting point. As different styles of improvisation speak to different aspects of consciousness and cognition, this basic definition will continue to evolve and develop. The crucial takeaway from the blindsight example is that we are not conscious of everything we perceive. A huge part of humans’ problem-solving capabilities is unconscious, and improvisation is one means to access this unconscious mind.

It is also important to briefly distinguish the term brain from that of mind. Throughout, brain will be used to mean the literal organ between
the ears. When describing scanning technology or specific regions and clusters, the term brain will be used. On the other hand, mind will refer to a vaster and much more mysterious set of connections. The mind includes other parts of the body (such as spine, heart, and gut), energy from the environment, and connections with other people. Brain goes with neuroscience and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and mind goes with thinking, perception, and identity formation.

Throughout this book, specific regions in the brain will be discussed, but this will never be to say that one region is doing all the work, that regions work in isolation, or that mental processing involves only brain regions. Even when brain regions are described more specifically, the frame for this book and for its understanding of the mind is that of situated cognition. Philosophy professors Philip Robbins and Murat Aydede summarize the premise of situated cognition:

First, cognition depends not just on the brain but also on the body (the embodiment thesis). Second, cognitive activity routinely exploits structure in the natural and social environment (the embedding thesis). Third, the boundaries of cognition extend beyond the boundaries of individual organisms (the extension thesis). 

Consciousness does not start and end in the brain but is a complex interaction between the body, the environment, and other bodies. Even containing consciousness only in the body is too simplistic, as consciousness extends between and amongst bodies. Philosopher Alva Noë also makes the argument toward a more comprehensive, embodied consciousness:

we ought to reject the idea—widespread in both philosophy and science—that perception is a process in the brain whereby the perceptual system constructs an internal representation of the world. No doubt perception depends on what takes place in the brain, and very likely there are internal representations in the brain... What perception is, however, is not a process in the brain, but a kind of skillful activity on the part of the animal as a whole.

It is essential to remember that perception is something that is done but not done exclusively by the brain. Improvisation consists of specific environments and human interactions that are as much a part of what makes improv consciousness unique as what is happening in the brain. When the brain and brain regions are described, it is always through the underlying principles of situated cognition. The brain is just one part of a complex network that creates the mind.
In the article “This is your Brain on Jazz: Researchers use MRI to Study Spontaneity and Creativity” (2010) scientists scanned jazz musicians’ brains while they played memorized scores and also when they improvised.17 Interestingly, the scientists found that the part of the brain called the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex slowed down during improvised playing. This part of the brain has been linked to planning and self-censoring. The medial prefrontal cortex increased in activity in the improvising jazz musicians. This part of the brain is linked with self-expression and creativity. The brain works differently when musically improvising than when it is recalling memorized scores, but does this difference still exist with improvised versus scripted acting? Luckily, there is research linking music and language in the brain. The *Cognitive Neuroscience of Music* (2003), edited by psychology professor Isabelle Peretz and neuropsychology professor Robert Zatorre, contains essays linking music and language processing, as does senior fellow at the Neurosciences Institute Aniruddh D. Patel’s *Music, Language, and the Brain* (2008). Chapter 4 of this book explores the connections between music and language processing by asking how improv and current research such as the jazz musician fMRI study relate.

Cognitive theatre studies scholar Rhonda Blair’s book *The Actor, Image, and Action: Acting and Cognitive Neuroscience* (2008) summarizes the connections that recent cognitive studies discoveries have to Stanislavski-based acting systems.18 Blair describes the paradox of acting as both spontaneous and rehearsed:

> the actor's work is akin to that of the dancer's or the musician's, for each memorizes a score, whether it is textual, choreographic, or musical, that engages and interacts with the body. The same text or score may be memorized word for word, step by step, or note for note by different artists but the way in which the score is executed will vary greatly from individual to individual.19

Blair focuses on scripted productions in her book but writes, “since all performance is ultimately about how images in somebody's head work on the bodies of the performer and the audience, I believe there can be applications for any kind of theatre (but that is another book).”20 This is that other book, the one that focuses on improvisation. While Blair’s analysis of Stanislavski-based techniques and cognitive studies has some overlap with this project on improvisation, her focus is on careful textual analysis in rehearsals leading to a recapturing of spontaneity.
Instead of trying to recapture the spontaneity once experienced in rehearsals with no audience to enjoy it, this book connects cognitive studies with spontaneity experienced for the first time (not “as if” for the first time) in front of an audience. Those connections, as previously mentioned, always seem to be bubbling just below the surface of any discussion about improvised acting. This book makes those connections explicit.

Looking at how the mind functions spontaneously also has broader implications. Philosophers and spiritual leaders such as Deepak Chopra incorporate ancient religious traditions with current cognitive studies to teach rules for being present and open to each moment of life. Many of these rules are similar to improvisation and can relate to interactions as diverse as parenting, therapy, or business meetings. Looking at improv pedagogy and its effects on the mind is also looking at its effects on mankind and how people interact with each other. Viola Spolin believes her improv students are able to carry the skill of accessing their intuition into their everyday lives. She may be onto something, since improvisation rules may open people up to stronger identity formation, more empathy, and changes in consciousness where time, memory, and space can all be altered. As different branches of improvisation and their relationships to cognitive studies are explored later in this book, more implications of the importance of these broader connections will become clear. The narrow focus in the first three chapters will broaden, returning to the idea that improv and the mind is a topic about empathetic social interactions as much as it is theatre. But first, what is it that goes on in the mind of a skilled improviser when she takes the stage?

This study’s hypothesis is that an increase in intuition and creativity occurs because of similar regions in the brain affected in the Johns Hopkins brain scans. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and regions like it can be trained to decrease in activity and other regions, such as the medial prefrontal cortex, to increase in activity. Jazz musicians do this by learning the skills of jazz as second nature and then focusing on the music (not themselves). Theatrical improvisers do this by learning the skills required of improv as second nature and then focusing on their environment as it is mutually created through intense focus on others. This results in less self-consciousness and more intuitive playing, the true self over ego self according to Viola Spolin. It can also result in moments of flow, where time seems to be altered and everything seems to effortlessly fall into place. In moments of enhanced flow, memory can
be affected as well as time, since the parts of the brain being used are so different from day-to-day brain functioning. This improv brain functioning can be so distinct from the improviser’s everyday functioning that it can seem as if she is not herself while improvising.

Let me be totally upfront in regards to my own qualifications and limitations. I am certainly not a neuroscientist, psychologist, or cognitive philosopher. I use these sources when they apply to better understanding improvisation and the mind, but this book does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of the cognitive sciences. I have tried to use the most current findings in those fields, but my background is that of a theatre scholar and an improviser/actor. My hope is that neuroscientists, psychologists, and philosophers will take this basic connection of improvisation with their fields and add their expertise to create a more nuanced and complete discussion.

This book is also not a comprehensive history of improvisation. It uses historical information only when it relates to what happens to the mind during improvisation. This book focuses on improvisation forms that are most common and popular with heterosexual, white men. There are other kinds of improvisation that would add cultural nuance including the work of Augusto Boal and Jerzy Grotowski. This book is not an exhaustive look at all improvisation. Instead, it focuses on three forms that share some similar guidelines in the hopes that this narrow focus on forms that are familiar to this author will have broader applications to many fields and for many people.

Chapter outline

Chapter 1, “Viola Spolin: Games as a Means toward Flow, Empathy, and Finding One’s Truer Self,” goes back to the origins of contemporary, Chicago-based improvisation. The story of Viola Spolin’s early improv teaching is retold by focusing on her own writing as it relates to cognition. Spolin took Neva Boyd’s educational children’s games and applied them to adult performers, which her son Paul Sills expanded into the Compass Players and then Second City. This chapter explores the intentions behind Spolin’s teaching. What did she intend her improvisation to do, and what did she hope her students would gain from her instruction? Spolin describes her work as unlocking one’s real or true self, which deserves a closer look.
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