



Improvisational Conversations: Teaching as an Interpretive Practice

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Abstract:

Improvisation is a phenomenon that is deeply embedded in the day-to-day lives of teachers and students. Yet, few educators take the time to consider improvisation as being necessary to reach meaningful understandings with students. This paper is a hermeneutic inquiry that positions curriculum as improvisation by engaging in a conversation that may expand others' understandings of what it is and means to be a teacher who is living well with others. Examining specific incidents that have undergirded my life as a jazz musician and educator, I offer reflections on teaching as being, at its core, an interpretive practice. Drawing further on Gadamer's (2001) notion of genuine conversation, the history of jazz improvisation and my own lived experiences, I engage in a conversation about why I believe teaching is an interpretive practice akin to improvisation and genuine conversation.

Keywords: teaching; improvisation; practice; hermeneutics

Conversations improvisées : l'enseignement comme pratique d'interprétation

Résumé :

L'improvisation est un phénomène profondément ancré dans la vie quotidienne des enseignants et des étudiants. Pourtant, peu d'éducateurs prennent le temps de considérer que l'improvisation est nécessaire pour parvenir à une compréhension significative avec les élèves. Cet article est une enquête herméneutique qui positionne le curriculum comme une improvisation par s'engageant dans une conversation qui peut élargir la compréhension de ce que c'est l'herméneutique et de ce que signifie être une enseignante qui vit bien avec les autres. En examinant des incidents spécifiques qui ont marqué ma vie de musicienne de jazz et d'éducatrice, je propose des réflexions sur l'enseignement comme étant, à la base, une pratique interprétative. En m'appuyant davantage sur la notion de conversation authentique de Gadamer (2001), sur l'histoire de l'improvisation jazz et sur mes propres expériences vécues, j'engage une conversation sur les raisons pour lesquelles je crois que l'enseignement est une pratique interprétative comparable à l'improvisation et à la conversation authentique.

Mots clés : enseignement; improvisation; pratique; herméneutique

The beauty of playing with Miles was that he gave us so much freedom. . . No song ever sounded the same way twice, and often they wouldn't even be recognizable by the time they ended. Even the most familiar jazz standards became swirling, unpredictable explorations—"controlled freedom" was what we called it. Every player took turns soloing, and that was when it really took off in unknown directions. Miles didn't put any limits on us always encouraging us to be as adventurous as we could. Sometimes we would go so far out in our explorations, we'd almost lose track of the original song, but then Miles had the ability to step in and play a solo that somehow brought everything back together again.

(Hancock, 2014, p. 60)

As a jazz musician and educator, I have come to believe that teaching, at its core, is much like improvisational music. It is an interpretive act by multiple individuals that allows those gathered together to enrich their understanding of the activity at hand. Gadamer's (2001) notion of genuine conversation is similar to improvisation; one not only carries oneself in conversation but is carried by it. For me, conversation is a perfect metaphor for the music that permeates teaching. As I listen to and experience the sounds of teaching, each note has a way of lingering long after the last period bell. Each conversation I recall, between students and myself, tells me something about them and about me and how we might live well together. In this paper, I will utilize narratives as a way through my hermeneutic inquiry. The narratives that are shared will be based in hermeneutic theory, and the meaning of hermeneutics will be further explored in this paper.

In keeping with the responsive aspects of both conversation and improvisation, I have opened this academic conversation with a quotation taken from the 2014 autobiography of the legendary jazz musician and composer Herbie Hancock. The epigraph not only describes the interpretive freedom of the improvisational process, but is also a response to Miles Davis as a musical influence and teacher. Similarly, might we teachers journey alongside students and afford them the same kind of interpretive freedom through genuine and improvisational conversation?

A Sound That Lingered: Being Addressed by the Voice of the Young

Entering my first year of teaching, I was not convinced that teaching was the profession for me. Unlike many of my peers in teacher education, I did not come from a long lineage of educators. I did not hear the *call* of teaching that many teachers described on entering the profession. Instead, I entered because I was curious about what it was like to teach. I also thought that it might share some commonalities with what I loved most about musical improvisation—its unforeseen possibilities. I was shocked to find out that the dominant narratives in the profession did not often regard teaching as an open and interpretive practice. Rather, the profession sought out the opposite, educational assurance and certainty. The expectation of measuring student progress and teaching to the test, using fool-proof methods, placed me in a "bureaucratized teaching and learning system" focused on these assurances (Jardine, 2012, p. 3). The world of teaching that I found myself in felt far removed from the free space of jazz music, which I had called home for many years. However, several

months into my first year of teaching, I was—as hermeneutic researchers, philosophers and theorists often say—*addressed by the topic* (Gadamer, 2013, p. 299; Moules et al., 2015, p. 70-73). Moules et al. (2015) explain this fundamental hermeneutic notion: “Addresses catch us off guard and break through our regular routines. They cause us to pause and take note, not that we speak or do something immediately, but rather that we stop and listen” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 71). Addresses are crucial to hermeneutic inquires by serving the purpose of creating the opening that permits the formation of new understandings (Moules et al., 2015, pp. 70-73). For me, a hermeneutic inquiry began in my teaching practice when I was faced with having to pay attention to and work toward understanding the topic of improvisation in teaching as it was calling out to me in my everyday life (Moules et al., 2015, p. 72). I was *addressed by the topic* of what it is to teach.

One month into my teaching assignment, I was asked to take over teaching the junior jazz band as part of my extra-curricular contribution. Having spent many years performing in big bands and small groups, I could not wait to share all that I knew about music and jazz improvisation with students. The first couple of rehearsals that I attended were intended for me to observe the group. Upon my arrival, I was met with the familiarity of a group of sociable middle schoolers conversing about the day’s events while putting together their instruments before taking a seat. However, once rehearsal began, all conversations stopped and an intensely serious atmosphere fell over the room. Many years later, I still recall the impression that this rehearsal left on me. The rehearsal that I observed had a rigid structure that was repeated every day: warm-up, technique and pieces. The structure of rehearsal felt military-like, with students being instructed and expected to produce the desired results in time for a concert performance. This was not how I understood and had experienced jazz rehearsals outside of the classroom, and I wondered if things could be different here.

My first day leading rehearsal may not have seemed out of the ordinary. Students warmed up and took their seats like they did at any other rehearsal. Little did they know that I was going to introduce them to the works of Duke Ellington. On a rainy day in March, I pulled out an old record player and the class gathered around it. Students sat quietly as we listened to a recording of “Take The A Train” on vinyl. After the final note played, a quiet engulfed the room, leaving the final timbres of sound to linger and reverberate.

After several minutes had passed, a student broke the silence by asking, “Was that improvised?”

I answered yes by gently nodding my head.

Then came the question that claimed me: “How do I learn how to improvise?”

As I tried to show, explain and describe to the students how one learns to improvise, I found myself struggling to put into language how one does it. It seemed that no matter how well I understood improvisation, both as a term and as an experience, it was impossible to offer an answer to students that was recognizable as something that could be grasped with certainty. With each attempted answer, I was met with looks of bewilderment and dissatisfaction. My students were

awaiting a concrete answer, it seemed. I was “pulled up short” on the public stage known as the front of the classroom (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 295, drawing from Gadamer, 1993). Experiencing being “pulled up short” happens when “our beliefs are thrown into doubt without, and even despite, prior deliberation on our part” (Kerdeman, 2003, p. 294). In the classroom, I was “pulled up short” because I was unexpectedly facing and having to acknowledge “boundaries and limits” to my existing understandings of improvisation and teaching (p. 297). Improvisation and teaching became questionable as my existing beliefs and understandings were being challenged through an encounter with a student. Yet, this was the moment where improvisation and teaching met. It was a moment that captivated me for several years to come and taught me as well. Before continuing with this line of thought, I must first describe what it is like to improvise as a jazz musician.

Standing on the stage with my fellow musicians, the silence called to us. I was accustomed to the silence, yet I wrestled with the inner anticipation that came with not knowing what song would emerge. As with every other musical event, there was an unspoken familiarity that was inviting us to engage in a musical conversation that would break the silence. When the percussionist gently tapped a rhythm on the high-hat, a song began to surface from the silence. In response, our bassist offered a musical voice which echoed through the room as it walked along to the rhythmic changes of the high-hat. Then, quietly, the piano joined the conversation with a gentle cluster of tones that resonated and touched my inner soul. As the last musician to enter, I listened intently before responding. I played a lyrical melody on the saxophone. Although I had played this melody before, as I interacted with my fellow musicians, I embellished the melody; it changed with every musical moment. The interactions continued and the musical landscape continued to change, becoming more fluid and flexible as the musical voices began embracing one another in songs. These songs, although we had played them as ensembles before, were never played exactly like this before. This is how improvisation lives. It is attentive and responsive to self and others in the moment (Benson, 2003; Denzler & Gulonnet, 2021; Nachmanovitch, 2019; Nielsen, 2015).

On that stage, notes were not just sounds but the inner callings of the musicians asking to be heard by, responded to and cared for by one another. The results could not be pre-determined. For the jazz musicians, to improvise means engaging in a conversation with a group of others by being open and responsive to whatever they present in the ever-changing musical landscape (Denzler & Gulonnet, 2021; Nachmanovitch, 2019). To engage in such a practice requires individuals to be “intensely aware of what notes to play, when to play them and for what reason” so that the conversation can continue (Nielsen, 2015, p. 9). This requires making decisions and judgements in the moment (Berliner, 1994; Nachmanovitch, 2019; Nielsen, 2015). If one is not responsive and attentive to the other in the musical conversation (i.e., improvising), the jazz musician is regarded as not living well with others (Nachmanovitch, 2019; Denzler & Gulonnet, 2021). As a jazz musician and a scholar of curricular theory, it has become clear to me that improvisation is hermeneutical.

Hermeneutics and Improvisation

Hermeneutics, or the art of interpretation, offers no specific methodological advice. According to Moules et al. (2015), there is no singular definition for what hermeneutics is, nor is

there a step-by-step guide for how someone might interpret their world (p. 5). Although there is no method, at the heart of hermeneutic interpretation is an ongoing focus on “human understanding” and the creation of meaning (Gallagher, 1992, p. 7). Moules et al. (2015) remind us that the meanings of “things come from somewhere; they are not simply fabricated” and that for hermeneutics, this involves “a bringing forth and a bringing to language of something new” (p. 3). While hermeneutic interpretation cannot be taught as a specific method, it can be experienced and understood through practice (Moules et al., 2015, pp. 1-5). Hermeneutics, as a practice, assumes that “there is a ‘truth’ to be had, an understanding to be reached, an experience to be savoured in the provocative, unmethodical incidents of our lives that address us” (Jardine, 2015, p. 246). Truth, in this sense, “cannot be something we observe from a detached distance or in an objective way and claim to be ‘scientific’” (Lawn, 2006, p. 61). Instead, truth “is to be encountered: [it is] something that is experienced” while engaging with others in the world (Lawn, 2006, p. 61). Therefore, truth, in the hermeneutical sense, is something that becomes “disclosed or unconcealed” to us as we relationally investigate an incident that is situated in our lives (Jardine, 2015, p. 246; Moules et al., 2015, p. 26).

Much like hermeneutics, there is no step-by-step guide for engaging in improvisation with others. One cannot strategically pre/determine when improvisation can be present in the relational spaces between people; however, improvisation seems to be experienced in relational moments that accompany living alongside others in specific situations. Improvisation is a practice, as Nachmanovitch (2019) says, that offers human beings the space “to play with impermanence and interbeing. Person, place, thing, and idea are contingent on context” (p. 107). This points to a relational movement that is not easily captured in a certain number of words but is best understood and experienced in specific relational moments or incidents (Jardine, 1990, p. 227). As teacher and students interact, much like jazz musicians making music, there are incidents that can open up improvisation as an experience to help teachers better understand teaching as an interpretive practice.

The Question of Gathering

There is a phrase in education that teachers regularly take up when greeting students at the start of a new school year. We say, “It is all about the relationships.” Questions that leave teachers and students unable to reach an immediate understanding—questions such as “How do I learn to improvise?”—are places full of relational tension. As I understand it, hermeneutics calls upon us to venture into the middle of these relational tensions so that we might find ways into, out of, behind, in front of and around these places. As we venture, we encounter our own and others’ experiences of the lifeworld. These encounters present us with unforeseen questions and uncertainty and, as a result, have the power of opening up our existing understandings of the situation at hand and of expanding our interpretations. These interpretations that we carry from such encounters bring with them the many sounds of living a human life well and we must each decide what is worth holding onto as we move forward. Working with students in an interpretive way unavoidably carries with it two questions: 1) How do I live well with these students? and 2) How might we gather to reach an understanding?

Recently, in an engagement with the grade 7 students I teach, I experienced an illuminating moment of teaching and learning. This moment not only has something to say about improvisation, but also suggests how living well together might look like. On this ordinary day, the students were in the middle of learning songs using string and percussion instruments. Over the gentle strums and smacks of instruments, I heard the beginnings of a conversation as one of the students shouted, "Dude, I think you just improvised! That was sick!"

Another group member responded with, "Is that what that was? Wait, what actually is improvisation?"

I was drawn to the group's conversation like a magnet. I expected many things to happen during that activity, but I did not expect myself to stumble upon the term and experience of "improvisation" as something new in that conversation. Yet, here is where teaching as an interpretive practice lives: right in the middle of things, in what Jardine (1997) calls a "living topography" (pp. 229-230).

Gadamer (2001) reminds us that a part of coming to an understanding with another involves engaging in genuine conversation. This requires us "not just to hear one another but to listen" (Gadamer, 2001, p. 39). That day, I also listened—to two students trying to share with a third student what they understood improvisation to be, based on what they just experienced. Each of these students shared an understanding of their world and offered it to the others.

The first student said: "It's like when your mom doesn't know what to cook for dinner and she just looks in the fridge and grabs a whole bunch of ingredients and then magically makes something."

The second student excitedly chimed back: "Or like when you want to go for the layup in basketball but can't because someone gets in the way, so you deviate and pass the ball to a teammate instead. You just do not expect it to happen but then it happens. It is exactly like what happened when you two played the drums, and I played the guitar."

As I continued to listen, I heard each of them offer a "*new, unanticipated* (and most likely *unintended*) *re-voicing of a world*, a world full of multiple tales that are folds of the same cloth" (Jardine, 2008, p. 197).

The third student remained quiet with an expression of deep contemplation. Wondering what he might have to offer, I calmly probed to see if he had anything to add.

The third student took a minute to compose himself before stating, "I have experienced similar situations, but I am not sure if I get how they count as improvisation. I'm just going to look it up." He pulled out his phone and plugged the word "improvisation" into an online dictionary. He read out the definition: "the act of improvising" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A look of annoyance took over his face. "That isn't a good definition," he said. "You cannot define something using the word you are trying to define. So, if we were to define improvisation today, so that we can all understand it, what would it be?"

The conversation continued with each student and I offering each other possible interpretations of what improvisation might be. So many unforeseen possibilities revealed themselves to us through that conversation. Each of us offered a uniquely individual and rich possibility for how the topic of improvisation could be “otherwise” understood (Jardine, 2008, p. 71). The longer we explored the topic, the more the students and I found ourselves unexpectedly caught in the middle of an intricate web of relations that existed within the term “improvisation”. It included its hidden histories, our existing understandings and our experiences of the situation. As a result, we had no choice but to reach a collaborative understanding of the term improvisation, so that “life [could] go on” (Smith, 1999, p. 41). Amidst the sounds of our conversation were the undertones of the laptops, books and instruments that were embraced to uncover and piece together the world of improvisation as a “living, breathing, contested, human discipline that had been handed to us” (Jardine et al., 1997, p. 30). As I listened, it became clear that not only did each of us have something to say about improvisation, but that improvisation had something to say about itself and how we were living together.

Improvisation: Its Musical History and the Way It Lives in the World

The word “improvise” is quite ordinary. When used in the rhythm of a conversation or everyday life, it is often a word that goes unnoticed. Phrases such as “I will just improvise” or “let’s improvise” are some popular uses. The word “improvise” can carry with it a wide variety of creative images ranging from cooking to music, dance, poetry and art. Yet, somehow, the word “improvise” points to a kind of creativity that is responsive action. As Charlie pointed out, improvisation as a noun means “the act of improvising” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). As a verb, the word “improvise” means “to compose, recite, play or sing extemporaneously” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Tracing the word back to its etymological origins, improvise is derived from the Latin word “improviso” meaning “unforeseen; not studied or prepared for” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). Although at first glance, the word “improvise” might seem ordinary, but the more it is examined, turned and shifted, the more it becomes an act attuned to the possible.

Improvisation has a long history in various artistic practices. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on the history of improvisation as a musical practice. The history of improvisation as a musical practice is difficult to trace because it has not always been well documented (Rose, 2017). Yet, there is no denying that, for musicians who engage in improvisation, its history is rich and speaks to a way of living with others.

As a musical practice, improvisation is thought to have originated “in music of cultures that contributed slaves to the New World” (Gridley, 2012, p. 44). According to Gridley (2012), it was first practiced primarily with vocals or on Indigenous drums before moving to other instruments. Although improvisation is often misunderstood as an “American musical expression”, it does not belong entirely to one group of people, asserts Sarath (2018, p. 1), who notes that nor can it be “disconnected from its musical/spiritual roots” which emphasizes “personalized expression amidst a collective interaction” (Sarath, 2018, p. 10).

In North America, jazz improvisation was first understood as “the practice of spontaneously varying individual parts” (Gridley, 2012, p. 44). The spontaneous musical interactions that Berliner (1994) and Nachmanovitch (2019) describe as improvisation are thought to have origins in African work and blues songs, with individuals calling out phrases to one another (Sarath, 2018). One might note that although improvisation was first recognized for its individual parts, these individual parts also fit into the larger picture of not only a song but a musical conversation between human beings (Bailey, 1992; Berlin, 1994; Denzier & Guionnet, 2021; Nachmanovitch, 2019). As such, improvisation can “fulfill different needs and ways of being human” (Turino, 2008, pp. 1).

Gridley (2012) asserts that the phrase “call and response” became formally attached to blues music in the early to mid-1900s. Berlin (1994) and Nachmanovitch (2021) suggest that the human need to be heard and responded to reflects changing social conditions in the United States. “Call and response” as a concept is rather simple: one musician says something as if it is a question and another musician responds through sound or silence (Berliner, 1994; Gridley, 2012). Put another way, it is a musical conversation called improvisation (Benson, 2003; Denzier & Guionnet, 2021; Berliner, 1994).

In the 1920s, improvisation situated itself in big band settings during the iconic swing era. Musicians would play written parts or scored music that had open sections for soloing or for a musical device known as “trading fours” which, at the time, became a synonymous phrase for “call and response” (Berliner, 1994; Gridley, 2012). During the 1920 and 1930s, composers and band leaders, such as Duke Ellington, would often write music to showcase specific musical voices in relation to others, thus keeping musical conversation embedded in their practices (Walser, 2015). In the mid 1940s, ensemble formats shifted to small group settings, partly due to the political and economic climate, but also because many musicians, such as Charlie Parker, wanted more creative freedom (DeVeaux, 1997). Improvisation practices, according to DeVeaux (1997), remained embedded in music-making during the 1940s by incorporating long open solo sections that could be sustained for minutes on end (Berliner, 1994; Bailey, 1992). From the 1950s onward, improvisational practices were seen in both small group and big band settings, but they also snuck into popular music (Gridley, 2012, pp. 164-182; Bailey, 1992). Today, in many Canadian schools, both big bands and small ensembles are used as vehicles for learning musical practices. It is interesting to me that while many people today link improvisation to jazz or big band music, they often do not often see how improvisation is embedded in the world around them.

Currently, improvisation is recognized in the world by key values and characteristics regarding how it is to be practiced. A key component of improvisation is having people gathered together to reach individual and collective understandings in a variety of social settings (Rose, 2017; Nachmanovitch, 2021; Sarath, 2018). In many cultures, improvisational music is uniquely positioned as a vehicle concerned with simultaneously expressing and experiencing individual and collective voices in real time (Rose, 2017; Benson, 2003). Improvisation is less about an end-product than it is about a process in which a product such as a work of art or an understanding can emerge (Benson, 2003; Rose, 2017; Nielsen, 2015). In other words, improvisation, when practiced well, carries with it the deliberate cultivation of listening, speaking and responding to others. When one is situated right

in the middle of various soundscapes or environments, one might not only produce new music but might come to understand the world in a different way (Nachmanovitch, 2021).

I shared a brief and incomplete history of musical improvisation to show how improvisation does not belong to musicians, nor to students, nor to me. Instead, improvisation belongs to humankind and is “full of ancestors, ghosts, inheritances, bloodlines, comforts, faces, dates and names and kindred spirits, ongoing . . . conversations that are still happening” (Jardine et al., 1997, p. 69). Much like a shapeshifter, improvisation has taken on different musical shapes at different points in time. However, improvisation has been and continues to be attuned to the possible.

A Note on Teaching and Improvisational Moments

Despite improvisation being thought of by many musicians as originating in musical practices, improvisation is not a new phenomenon in education (Bailey, 1992; Berliner, 1994; Rose, 2017; Gridley, 2012). Aoki (1990) has acknowledged improvisation as being necessary to live well with students (pp. 367-370). For Aoki (1986/1991, 1990), teachers need to be responsive and attuned to the students, and can do so by creating an improvisational space for the ebb and flow between self, others and curriculum matter. Grumet (1993), Pinar (1994) and Todd (2007) echoed Aoki’s (1986/1991, 1990) view by emphasising the need for teachers to exercise their individual judgements by listening and responding to the specific students in front of them. Pinar (1994), Grumet (1993), Aoki (1986/1991, 1990) and Todd (2007) all call on teachers to embrace the notion that teaching is an interpretive practice that cannot solely rely on scientific methods. Rather, teaching can be thought of as an interpretive practice by “recogniz[ing] that every curriculum is an improvisation” on the life we are living and the life we have lived (Grumet, 1993, p. 206). Thinking of teaching as an interpretive act that is improvisational recognizes that there is a fluid movement between the “curriculum-as-planned” and the “curriculum-as-lived”, which accounts for the specific relational interactions between students and teachers (Aoki, 1986/1991, p. 161). If this relational space is the improvisational space of teaching, then improvisation might also be understood as the relational space necessary for engaging with others.

Reflections on Improvisation in a Particular Moment in Teaching

Improvisation, as the students and I discovered that day, “requires something of us” (Jardine et al., 1997, p. 91). Improvisation seems “to require our attention and devotion and love and care” to make sense of an experience (Jardine et al., 1997, p. 91). It has a way of asking us to venture into a landscape “with all of our differences” and to take the time to “learn from” it not just “about” it (Jardine et al., 2008, pp. 228-229). There was a wonder in our classroom that day. As the students and I were trying to make sense of improvisation, our conversation carried the values and characteristics of improvisation. We were unknowingly improvising! As the students so quickly pointed out, one can find the voice of improvisation in the ordinariness of one’s day-to-day life. Despite its deep history in music, improvisation can flourish in “abundance” both inside and outside of the music classroom (Jardine et al., 1997, p. 39). The implicit challenge in improvisation is that once a voice is heard, how does one translate one’s understanding of it into language so that it can be shared with others?

A Special Kinship: Teaching and Improvisation

The voice of improvisation found me that day amidst the ordinariness of the shuffling chairs, instruments, books and dynamic conversations. It spoke with a deep resonating sound that lingered in my teaching practice long after. Over the years, the voice of improvisation has been “re-awakened” through conversations with students (Jardine, 2012, p. 7). I remember not only how improvisation claimed me so long ago, but how it reflects “back to me ‘kinships’ of which I was not aware” of at the time (Jardine, 2008, p. 201). Teaching and improvisation have been reconciled in the life I live both as a musician and teacher. In this teaching-improvisation kinship, I have found an understanding all my own: improvisation is embedded in the conversations that teachers have with their students. As I have lived through specific incidents, it has seemed that at the heart of both teaching and improvisation is an ongoing call to honor the many voices at play in particular relational moments or incidences. This is done by “allowing the voice of the other to speak, without it swallowing up [my] own voice”, which requires cultivating an openness to the unforeseen possibilities that each relational moment or incident possess (Benson, 2003, p. 176).

Improvisational Conversations

That day in the classroom something else happened. The unforeseen possibilities of improvisation both as a term and an experience also left a sound that lingered long after the last period bell. The many questions surrounding improvisation continue to serve me as an ongoing reminder that teaching is an interpretive act. At its core, teaching as an interpretive act requires a gathering together to reach meaningful understanding. Each time I engage in a conversation with students, I continue to be struck by the unforeseen possibilities of what might emerge. The sounds of silence, listening, hearing, speaking and saying may all lead to understandings being brought forth through language while in conversation or teaching. I confess that the unforeseen possibilities of conversation are both simultaneously exhilarating and disquieting because there is no telling what understandings I might find or lose.

Year after year, students and I still regularly gather around the topic of improvisation. Each time, improvisation seems to show up unannounced. The conversations sound deeply familiar but resonate with many new, unfamiliar undertones. As I continue journeying alongside students in an interpretive way, I am reminded of Van Manen’s (2016) wise words, that children “come to us bearing a gift: the gift of the possible” (p. 11). As I have experienced it, this gift can be best tapped during conversation, an improvisational conversation, where I as teacher model learning and teaching as an interpretive practice.

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