PLAY WHO YOU ARE

Learning from a Decade of Community Improvisation

Having identified key principles of improvisatory collaboration – power-sharing, responsive listening, trust, risk-taking, real-time decision making – we explore how these practices affect non-professional participants, and how they might contribute to broader social well-being. Drawing on ten years (2008-2017) of interviews and observations – with youth participants, support staff, and family members; with musician-facilitators, audience members, and researchers – we have identified the following key research findings about the process and impacts of the Play Who You Are improvised music workshops and performances.

Research Findings

Impacts for youth participants:
- Youth report increased self-confidence, as musicians and in their social relationships
- Youth describe satisfaction at having faced a new challenge and successfully met their goals
- Improvised music offers a mode of power-sharing and co-creation that enables youth to take risks, and to learn, without fear of judgment or failure
- Improvising together creates conditions for trust-building, interpersonal connection, and community formation

[The musician was] facilitating the music, but the music was facilitating the relationships.
- IICSI Researcher

- Staff and parents observe that youth develop the confidence to take on roles (eg conducting the group; performing for an audience) that are new to them
- Staff and parents observe increased self-expression, through music

Community impacts:
- Audience members and observers note productive disruptions to conventional ideas about dis/ability, and about who can and cannot be a ‘real’ musician
- Improvising together enables relationship-building and deepens community cohesion beyond the scope of the workshop

I think of improvisation [as] building relationships with community members that didn’t exist before — in music.
- PWYA Facilitator

Learning outward: Broader implications

We agree with the youth participant quoted at the top of this poster: the world would be a much nicer place — more inclusive, with more confident and collaborative people, and more cohesive communities — if we took seriously the principles of musical improvisation. Power-sharing, confident risk-taking, careful and responsive listening, and collaborative creation all contribute to the creation of safe and healthy communities.

As Heble et al note in their analysis of Play Who You Are activities, “when students become active participants in the production of knowledge […] they model new kinds of relationships, and they become engaged and curious listeners; they begin, in effect, to hear and to play the world anew.” We will continue to explore and expand the ways in which improvised community music can contribute to the ongoing creation of a better world, in which people of all abilities and identities are able, and welcome, to play who they are.

Researchers

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