Improvising a Future in the Performing Arts: The Benefits of Reframing Performing Arts Entrepreneurship Education in Familiar Terms

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Abstract: *Improvisation is a central concept in any drama, theatre or performance studies degree. It is a critical skill, which helps performers learn to 'make it up as they go along', apply existing skills to new situations and environments, and, of course, adapt find the most effective or creative pathway towards a their aims. As such, the fact that improvisation is rarely listed as a core career competency—even for performing arts graduates, who can struggle to engage with entrepreneurial skill sets they will need to learn to manage their unpredictable portfolio careers when they are couched in business terms—is somewhat strange. This paper examines the benefits of reframing the administrative, management and entrepreneurial skills arts graduates need to navigate a complex, uncertain, constantly changing industrial landscape in terms of improvisation, play, and playful self-performance. It suggests that adding improvisation to our career training arsenal may be worthwhile, not just because it may assist graduates in navigating their way through a portfolio career, but because it may offer a more familiar, user-friendly terminology to assist graduates in understanding the need to develop administrative, management and entrepreneurial as well as artistic skills, and, in a sense, understand the similarities between the two sets of skills.*

Keywords: *Entrepreneurship Education; Performing Arts Education; Arts Careers; Career Competencies; Improvisation.*

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Introduction

Improvisation is a central concept in any drama, theatre and performance studies degree. Whether our degree program trains would-be performers, directors, dramaturgs, devisors, playwrights, producers, drama teachers or a combination of all of these, improvisation always comes up in the practices we teach and the methods by which we teach them. It is something we expect our graduates to be able to do. Though definitions vary, improvisation is most often described as a process of "making it up as you go along"[1], though, ironically, this ability to be creative is premised on highly repetitive exercises, processes and protocols that enable students to develop the skills to be creative in their response to new scenarios or situation. In theatrical contexts, then, making it up as you go along does not necessarily mean anything goes. Making it up as you go along more typically means applying rules, routines or response possibilities/processes practiced over time to a new scenario, a new set of hurdles, in a spontaneous and creative way way. It combines convergent and divergent thinking, repetitive and creative processes, openness and play with clear, goal-directed action. This is a valuable skill. It helps us negotiate a landscape, learn, and come up with new ideas. It helps us manage our own actions. It helps us manipulate our interactions with others. All of which is highly advantageous in adapting as a given story, scenario or situation plays out, whether in dramatic performance, or in day-to-day performance in social contexts. Improvisation has, as a result, long been recognised as useful in teaching children to cope with their world, in community work, and in therapy, as well as in coming up with characters, scenes, stories and insight in an actor training or theatrical context[2].

    With all this to offer, improvisation perhaps ought to be listed amongst the core graduate capabilities of any drama, theatre and performance studies degree. After all, as Tom Vanderwell[3] notes in his argument about the use value of theatre training, a theatre graduate competent and confident with improvising can work well within a changing, unpredictable and uncertain world. They can maintain their cool as plots change, people falter, and props malfunction, fail or breakdown. They can do what they way even with scare resources, support or visible recognition of their efforts. They can deal with it when something takes

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[1] Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manuel of Improvisation* (Colorado Springs CO: Meriweather Publishing, 1994), 13-14.

[2] John Hodgson and Earnest Richards, *Improvisation* (London:Methuen, 1966) ix, 1; Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching & Directing Techniques,* Third Edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999) 4; Dan Diggles, *Improv for Actors* (New York NY: Allworth Press, 2004) 4-15.

[3] Tom Vanderwell, "10 Ways Being a Theatre Major Prepared Me For Success", *Wayfarer* (16 January 2012), http://tomvanderwell.wordpress.com/2012/01/16/10-ways-being-a-theatre-major-prepared-me-for-success/ (accessed 01/02/2012).

them by surprise. "Theatre [training]," Vanderwell says, "taught me to focus, think quickly and make do while giving the impression that you've got it all under control"[4]. It is therefore, he says, something that has served himself and his fellow graduates well not just on stage but on the stage of daily life as changing policy, industrial and production practices wreak havoc with the best laid plans, aspirations and ambitions for their working futures. Improvisation is, in effect, precisely the sort of skill a drama, theatre and performance studies graduate needs to be able to manage the "portfolio career," in which they move between roles, organisations and opportunities often on a freelance basis, that career theorists recognise to be their destiny[5]. Indeed, though it is not a concept developed in career literature to date – or, as a result, as skill advocated – improvisation does increasingly appear in descriptions of the skills all today's workers need to be able to apply to work in an uncertain, changing environment in which traditional career scripts no longer apply[6].

Intriguingly, though, skills in improvisation, play and playful self-performance are never cited as critical graduate capabilities, no matter how valuable these might be in a Higher Education environment that increasingly emphasises employability, careers, and career management[7]. In the Australian

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Ruth Sarah Bridgstock, *Success in the protean career : a predictive study of professional artists and tertiary arts graduates*, PhD thesis (Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology, 2007); Dawn Bennett, "Academy and the Real World: Developing Realistic Notions of Career in the Performing Arts, *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, 8.3 (2009), 307-329.

[6] Karl E. Weick and Lisa L. Berlinger, "Career Improvisation in Self-Designing Organisations, in Michael B. Arthur, Douglas T. Hall, Barbara S. Lawrance, *Handbook of Career Theory* (New York NY: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989), 313-328; Karl E. Weick, "Collective mind in organisations: Heedful interrelating on flight decks", *Administration Science quarterly*, 38 (1993) 357-381; Karl E. Weick, "Enactment and the Boundaryless Career: Organising as We Work", in Michael B. Arthur and Denise M Rousseau, *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organisational Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 40-57; Karl E. Weick, "Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis", *Organizational Science*, 9.5 (1998) 543-555; Vera Dusya and Mary Crossan, "Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams", *Organization Science*, 16.3 (2004) 203-224.

[7] Denise Bradley, *Review of Australian Higher Education Final Report* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2008); Commonwealth of Australia, *Transforming Australian Higher Education* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2009), http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Pages/TransformingAustraliasHESystem.aspx (accessed 02/12/2011); cf. Jonathan Bollen "Precarious balance & extra-daily effort', *RealTime* issue #80 (August-September 2007), 15; Fred Hilmer, cited in Luke Slattery, "Reforms "recipe for mediocrity, not excellence"' The Australian (May 5, 2010), http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/reforms-recipe-for-mediocrity-not-excellence/story-e6frgcjx-1225862253089 (accessed 24/01/2011); Andrew Norton,

Learning and Teaching Council's recently released Learning and Teaching Standards for the Creative and Performing Arts, for example, there is acknowledgement that graduates need to know the practices, techniques and technologies associated with their artform, know how to create artworks, know how to do this in collaboration with others, know how to communicate with spectators, audiences and other stakeholders, and know how to deal with the social, cultural, economic or ethical issues that arise in their industry[8]. There is, in this sense, acknowledgement that graduates are going to need more than artistic skills, that they are going to need self-management, management and entrepreneurial skills to navigate a complex working climate. There is, however, no mention of the fact that improvisational skills might in fact serve graduates fairly well when it comes to entrepreneurship, risk taking, resilience and working to find ways to make things happen whatever hurdles come up. Indeed, there is no literature at all noting the fact that improvisational skills might in fact serve graduates well in scanning their ever-changing environment, selecting suitable professional development, project and employment opportunities for themselves, securing opportunities, and altering their course to address opportunities or challenges in a work world where they, not an agent or an arts organisation, will be controlling their career path.

My research this area suggests adding improvisation to our career training arsenal may be worthwhile, not just because it may assist graduates in navigating a complex, changing career landscape, but because it may offer a more familiar, user-friendly terminology to assist graduates in understanding the need to develop administrative, management and entrepreneurial as well as artistic skills, and, in a sense, the similarities between the two skill sets. In a recent study of students, graduates and industry stakeholders of the Bachelor of Fine Arts (Drama) program at QUT, the need to develop this more familiar, user-friendly and arts related focus was clear. The data indicated that students were reluctant to select studies in administration, management or other career relevant areas because they were not as sexy as the acting, designing or directing subjects on offer. They were reluctant to accept how often they would need

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"Gillard Disrespects Higher Education" (September 13, 2010),
http://andrewnorton.info/2010/09/13/gillard-disrepects-higher-education/ (accessed 01/02/2011).

[8] Jonathan Holmes, *Creative & Performing Arts Learning & Teaching Academic Standards Statement* (Canberra: Australian Learning & Teaching Council (Now Office Learning & Teaching), Department Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010), www.olt.gov.au (accessed 02/02/2012) 3, 12. In Australia, the Australian Standard Classification separates educational fields into eight broad aggregates – architecture and building; arts, social sciences and humanities; business, management and economics; creative and performing arts; engineering and ICT; health, medicine, and veterinary science; law; science.

to manage or entrepreneur their own and other organisation's production practices in the future that the graduates and general industry stakeholders were describing for them. They were wary of the way this appeared to place administration above the aesthetic work about which they were passionate. And they were, finally, reluctant to accept a lack of ready-made 'do X via Y and you will get Z outcome' type answers about how to apply management skills to their own aspirations or ambitions and about how much time, thought and energy this would actually take in their day-to-day work in the future. Although the actual statistical results of that student are being shared elsewhere[9], this article also addresses the results of this study of performing arts student career expectations, albeit it a far more theoretical, conceptual, or future-casting way. It proposes that students' reluctance to accept the full range of administration, management and entrepreneurial skills required to succeed in what will most likely be a portfolio career might be addressed by reframing these skills in the more familiar language of improvisation, play and playful self-performance.

A Performing Arts Career

In a general sense the term career refers to a person's cumulative work experience, as well as the identity, status, sense of achievement and sense of security they establish as a result of this work experience[10]. It is connected to the ideas about identity, status and success that prevail in a given culture at a given time. Historically, careers have occurred in a single organisational setting and people have used the roles, ranks and opportunities set out by that organisation as their measure of success. Today, careers more typically occur across several organisational settings and people select their own opportunities and set out their own measures of success[11]. This – the emergence of what commentators call boundaryless, protean or portfolio careers – is the result of economic, social and lifestyle shifts in which long-term employment is no longer the norm[12]. Today, as Weick and Berlinger say, "career unfolds in a flexible system where

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[9] Bree Hadley, Sandra Gattenhof, David Megaritty "Is This Really Relevant? Performing Arts Education, Entrepreneurship Education & Employability", *Pronouncing T&L in Creative Industries* (QUT Creative Industries, 2016)

[10] Michael B. Arthur, Douglas T. Hall and Barbara S. Lawrence, "Generating new directions in career theory: the case for a transdisciplinary approach", in Michael B. Arthur, Douglas T. Hall, Barbara S. Lawrence eds., *Handbook of Career Theory* (New York NY: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1989) 7-25, 7-8.

[11] Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau, "Introduction: The Boundaryless Career as a New Employment Principle", in Michael B. Arthur and Denise M Rousseau, *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organisational Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 3-20, 3-5.

[12] Ibid. 3-4.

change is continuous, experiments are routine, and growth replaces advancement as a measure of success"[13].

In drama, theatre and performance studies our graduates have always been ahead of the curve when it comes to the concept of portfolio careers. With the exception of rare paradigms in which a performer is able to join a permanent ensemble and progress through apprenticeship into paid work, directors, writers, designers, performers and producers have almost always had highly mobile careers in which, as Bennett says, they "meet their needs through acting in multiple concurrent roles"[14]. For our graduates, career has almost always been an idiosyncratic journey without a standard route or a set destination, and one which sometimes only makes retrospect. "Mirroring careers in the arts," Bennett observes, "general labour market trends [today] have seen more people expand their work behaviours, competencies and connections in search of success that is determined not in the eyes of others, but in terms of self-identity, intrinsic success and the meeting of personal and professional needs"[15].

According to the literature, a portfolio career which places the responsibility for progression on the person themselves has both its good points and its challenging points. One the one hand, a portfolio career which spans several employers, in which prospects for success are based on networks, information and opportunities external to any one employer, offers performing arts and other graduates a lot of freedom to pursue their own passions, in their own way, and balance their interests in terms of artform, financial stability, family, free time, and so forth[16]. On the other hand, a portfolio career also requires a lot of extra skills, extra competencies, extra confidence and resilience. To succeed in a portfolio career performing arts graduates must be able to embrace: the idea of life-long learning, the idea of returning to a novice role repeatedly, the need to construct one's own scripts, scenarios or narratives of what a fragmentary career reality means, the need to be enterprising and entrepreneurial to manage information, networks and emergent opportunities, the need to improvise to adapt to emergent opportunities, and, last but not least, Weick says, the need to show "compassion for others struggling with the uncertainties of boundaryless life"[17]. In sort, to succeed, performing arts graduates must be able to embrace what commentators like Beckerman, Bennett, Brown, and Evans characterise as entrepreneurial skills. If a graduate can build these attitudes and aptitudes, the twists, turns and surprises of the portfolio career can provide a satisfying opportunity to learn, improvise, improve and pursue new projects or areas of

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[13] Karl E. Weick and Lisa L. Berlinger, 313.

[14] Dawn Bennett, 312.

[15] Ibid. 311.

[16] Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau, 6.

[17] Karl E. Weick 1996, 54; cf. Michael B. Arthur and Denise M. Rousseau, 11-12.

passion[18] in a life story that "will have made sense," Weick says, "even though that sense is not currently evident"[19]. If not, the twists, turns and surprises of the portfolio career are potentially a source of tension and stress. At bottom, as Weick puts it, a portfolio career is "more reliant on improvisation"[20] than previous forms of career – it is based on spontaneous application and adaptation of skills sets that emphasis entrepreneurship, enterprise, experiment, risk-taking and resilience rather than on set scripts. And, of course, this improvisation takes place not on stage but on the stage of daily life, making the stakes potentially somewhat higher for the players involved.

The challenge performing arts graduates face in transitioning to a portfolio career that lacks the singularity, stability and security of convention careers has led commentators to argue that they need more than the skill sets in performing, directing, designing or writing they have traditionally been taught. In reports on how to succeed in a performing arts career by Brown[21], Beckerman[22], Evans[23] and others graduates are advised to develop the career self-management, management and marketing skills they need to find an audience for their work, and the entrepreneurial skills they need to find support for their work, together with the networking skills they need to find, make and maintain relationships with the right people[24]. In our study, the advice our industry

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[18] Karl E. Weick 1996, 40.

[19] Ibid. 54.

[20] Ibid. 40.

[21] Ralph Brown, *Performing Arts Entrepreneurship* (Lancaster: Palatine, 2004); Ralph Brown, Employability Issues in HE Performing Arts (Lancaster: Palatine, 2003); Ralph Brown, Graduate Employment in the Performing Arts (Lancaster: Palatine, 2003), http://www.palatine.ac.uk/files/1128.pdf (accessed 02/12/2011).

[22] Gary Beckerman, "Adventuring Arts Entrepreneurship Curricula in Higher Education: An Examination of Present Efforts, Obstacles, and Best Practices", *The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society*, 37.2 (2007), 87-112.

[23] Mark Evans, *ICEBreaker* (Lancaster: Palatine, 2007).

[24] This project's focus on drama, theatre and performance education necessitates a focus on entrepreneurship skills as defined in that literature, in particular in the work of key theorists such as Gary Beckerman, Dawn Bennett, Ralph Brown and Mark Evans. Although this project's focus necessitates a focus on literature specific to that field, and thus draws primarily on the work of Beckermann, Bennett, Brown and Evans, it is important to note there are numerous definitions of entrepreneurship in the creative industries more broadly (often with a more commercially oriented focus to encompass music, design, and media and other disciplines encompassed in the cultural and creative industries more broadly). These include, for example, definitions offered in Bonita Kolb (2015) *Entrepreneurship for the Creative and Cultural Industries*, Routledge; Robert Hewison and John Holden (2011) *The Cultural Leadership Handbook*, Gower; Collette Henry and Anne de Bruin (ed.) 2011 *Entrepreneurship and the Creative Economy: Process, Practice and Policy*, Edward Elgar; Gary D. Beckerman (ed.) 2010 *Disciplining the Arts: Teaching Entrepreneurship in Context*, R&L Education; Collette Henry (ed.) *Entrepreneurship in the Cre-*

stakeholders offered drama, theatre and performance studies students was much the same. Our stakeholders emphasised that our graduates need a strong grasp of industrial history, policy and practice, strong skills in networking, promoting and producing work, the ability to self- employ, and the ability to seek employment in allied roles, forms and fields, to succeed. They need a combination of conceptual and practical skills, divergent and convergent thinking, so they can consider a range of possibilities open to them, but, once choices are made, pursue them with the sort of diligent, goal-directed single-mindedness that is necessary for ideas to come to fruition in a complex working context with many hurdles to negotiate[25].

If we look at this advice in the context of QUT's curriculum, QUT has actually always offered students the opportunity to develop skills in both entrepreneurship, as the more open, creative and conceptual side of arts business, and management, as the more closed, administrative, routine side of arts business, through a variety of optional arts policy, management and marketing subjects, streams and majors. It has always been a critical, if not a compulsory, part of the curriculum. Accordingly, when the data from this recent study suggested

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ative Industries: An International Perspective, Edward Elgar, along with those offered in dozens of articles by these and other authors in journals such as *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education*, *Higher Education Research & Development*, and *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. There are also large volumes of literature on entrepreneurship, and to a lesser degree entrepreneurship education, in general or in other defined business, corporate or community fields. A full survey of this literature is beyond the scope of this article.

[25] There is as a result of vocational imperatives in Higher Education at present a strong imperative for those graduating drama, theatre and performance students to provide entrepreneurship education, along with strong evidence of entrepreneurship education's success in the work of Beckerman, Bennett, Brown, Evans, and others, as well as coments of stakeholders in our study. It is however with nothing, as Beckerman (2007) does, that some conservatory-trained performing skills teachers do still prefer to see this as a talent rather than a teachable skill, and these teachers tend to cite the fact that not every single student succeeds in developing this skill during their degree as evidence of this argument. Their comments, moreover, tend to be based on anecdote – they point to this or that student who did or did not succeed, rather than a more complete study of the sort offered in Beckerman, Bennett, Brown, Evans, or, indeed, in the project that underpins this article. In this study, our data indicated that, whilst there is a small % do not learn this entrepreneurial skill set well enough to deploy in industry it no matter the training method, that is equally true of acting, directing, writing, and every other skill set taught to graduates. This, accordingly, does not constitute evidence that these skill sets are not teachable – it does not devalue the evidence from Beckerman and others regarding teachability, does not preclude curriculum interventions and innovations in relation to the teaching of this skill set, and, above all, does not detract from the demand to train in this area to ensure good vocational graduate outcomes that most in Higher Education – particularly publicly funded Higher Education – experience today, as a primary motivator for presentations of articles like this one.

a need to make these skills more ubiquitous amongst graduates we were expanding rather than starting from scratch with our offerings. We started to teach the career self-management, management and marketing skills scholars say are so difficult to develop not only via optional study in management, marketing and business units but via compulsory study in these and the bigger concept of entrepreneurship in a capstone subject as our students got ready to graduate and head out into the real world of work. We started taking all 100+ of our final year drama students through entrepreneurial, enterprise and self-employment skills – in hypothetical scenarios if they chose – including the development of CVs, climate scanning, networking and interviewing skills, application writing skills, and a range of grant, program and project opportunities, as well as backfill in basic management, administration marketing and budgeting techniques for those who had opted not to understand specific studies in these areas. In the first iteration, we also asked students for feedback on adding compulsory study in these areas

In our study, we found that strategies commonly used to build the resilience, self-reliance and persistence graduates require – talking about portfolio careers, and portable, transferable skills, as well as practical things like budgets, management and marketing to support their performance work – can engender panic as easily as they can engender confidence. Our students did accept that they would not necessarily have a traditional career. Our students did also acknowledge that entrepreneurial, enterprise and management skills as well as artistic skills would be useful for their future careers. Or, at least, they acknowledged this to some degree – a lot skill thought that whilst performers, playwrights, directors, dramaturgs and designers would constantly need to create new opportunities those who went into producing or into teaching would have a more single, stable and secure career. That said, a lot were still reluctant to see self-management, management and entrepreneurial skills as equally useful and worthwhile as artistic performance skills. A lot were reluctant to accept the range of skills we said they would require – management and entrepreneurial, routine and creative, convergent and divergent – for improvising in their career, not just in their characters and scenarios in the stage work side of their career. And, finally, a lot were reluctant to accept case-by-case style answers about how to apply these skills to their own aspirations, and about the amount of time, though and energy this would actually take. Incorporating a multi-role status into the script of their identity[26] proved pretty hard. At a philosophical level, students still found it difficult to validate supposed non-artistic skills in a culture where artistic skills are still priorities as indicators of status and success. "Unfortunately, as Bennett says, "role models are most often successful performance artists, and there is a very real risk that students' performance identities preclude them from planning a positive engagement with non-performance ac-

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[26] Karl E. Weick 1996, 49.

tivities"[27], and some of that came out in our study. At a practical level, even when students were able to accept the usefulness of these skills, they had difficulty accepting the workload we were presenting as part of the day-to-day reality of the portfolio career[28]. Many became anxious about the amount of work required to do an environment scan to identify professional development, project, and job opportunities for themselves, wanting to narrow down to a single, specific thing to look for before they began to search, instead of accepting a series of strategic steps in a shifting path towards a set of goals might be required. Many became anxious about the amount of work required to do a cover letter, CV, or interview spiel, wanting to wait til they had the exact, right, relevant past roles before starting this, instead of accepting a need to work to draw out transferable skills, translate them into terms meaningful to stakeholders, and, in some cases, commit to training or volunteering to fill specific gaps. Most worryingly, many did not want to commit to something, even something hypothetical for the sake of the exercise, without thinking it all through and being sure they had the skills to succeed rather than fail before they started. They wanted this things to be routine, goal-directed, in relation to near certainties, not to be a complex combination of the routine, and the creatively improvised, where risks are as present as certainties. There were some who really seemed to resent being asked to identify aspirations, plan actions, and take actions in a context where they did not yet have the certainty that, as Weick and Berlinger[29] note, humans always tend to want. These students needed to get a lot better at recognising that an A + B + C + D + E step-by-step approach, rather than an A to E straight shot approach, is regularly going to be required to get towards a desired goal. They needed to get better at adapting, identifying alternative routes, and approaching problems from different angles when it became apparent that an A to E straight shot approach to a desired goal was not going to be possible. They needed, also, to develop the physical, psychological and social resilience to get past the fear of failure many of them felt.

These issues raised in the action research stage of our study resulted in some strange attitudes amongst students. There were a few historically high ranking students who told us that asking them to prepare their graduating performance, plus prepare job applications, grant applications and other documents required to pursue post-graduation opportunities at the same time, was impossible. Pointing out that this was exactly what professionals do in their own portfolio careers did not change this. There was, in fact, one student who went so far as to deliberately focus on the performance capstone subject alone, take a fail in the non-performance capstone subject running parallel with it, then come back to do that supposedly parallel subject a year later. Even some

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[27] Dawn Bennett, 313.
[28] cf. Ibid. 322.
[29] Weick and Berlinger 1989:313.

students who were a bit more committed to completing on time told us they would not do things this way in the real world – they would, they said, probably just do the project on a non-professional basis because they did not see themselves as being up to the sort of strategising, networking, negotiating, trial-and-error, experiment, risk, reversal and renewal that goes on around projects, programs and jobs in the professional world.

Naturally, these sorts of attitudes were not universal. For every one of these students I can name another student who embraced the skills on offer, used them, and as a result found their transition from study to work rapid and satisfying. That said, our industry stakeholders felt that even a few students graduating with this sort of attitude was a few too many, because it created problems in the way they engaged the industry in the first year or two after graduation. The industry stakeholders we spoke to did not look too fondly on graduates who got frustrated if things did not fall into place immediately, on graduates who got frustrated if they did not get a role doing what they want (or a get support role, or get any role) immediately, or got frustrated if industry did not immediately acknowledge the worth of what they wanted to do. Indeed, industry stakeholders tended to see such graduates, though comparatively rare, as self-centred, arrogant, and challenging to work with, and thus a problem we needed to address. The problem, industry stakeholders say, is more than just the fact that these graduates do not know enough about the policy, production and industrial climate they work in. It is, they say, that these graduates have "an over confident understanding of what they industry is"[30]. This leads to an attitude problem. The graduate, they say, does not know what they do not know, does not know how to operate in a way that works in the overarching operating climate, and does not know how to be receptive to and respectful of criticism. These graduates are not willing to adapt, and this means they cannot listen to, build on, and benefit from the feedback industry professionals are giving them to assist them to get ahead. In our study, we got a comment from one graduate that very clearly demonstrated the industry professionals' concern. "The industry people come in and say 'no, that's shit, why are you doing that'," this graduate notes, but then he goes on to say that although QUT did not teach it he personally is pleased that he has himself developed "the ability to turn around and go 'no that's my art practice fuck you I'm doing it'"[31] even if doing it then has to be on a non-professional basis. This is of course a one-off and rather extreme example of a graduate unwilling to adapt, alter course and improvise to create a career path in a given industrial climate. But, as I have said, for our industry stakeholders even a few in this boat, unwilling to work strategically, step-by-step, yet also creatively, adapting to the twists, turns, reversals and renewals in their portfolio career in a positive way, is a few too many. This is because this is

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[30] Arts Industry Focus Group – Respondent 4.
[31] Graduate Focus Group – Male Respondent 3.

the sort of graduate who ends up working for free in fringe, independent or amateur circuits forever, where they can do what they want to do and not worry about the more strategic approach they would have to take in a careerist or professional context. Or, of course, gives up and drops out of the industry when the frustration at not getting what they want gets to be too much. Whilst this might be fine if this is something the person has chosen from themselves, of course, it often is not something the person has chosen, and it clearly is not what scholars, industry stakeholders or fellow students want for this person.

Naturally, in the next iteration of the capstone subjects in our drama degree at QUT we used the information collected during our study to come up with more curriculum innovations – in particular, innovations which model a positive attitude to non-performance tasks, non-performance roles, and multi-identity roles – and these have been working well[32]. It also, though, got me thinking about whether a change in discourse which describes some of these attitudes, aptitudes and processes in terms valued more positively amongst our students might also be useful here.

Improvisation As A Performing Arts Graduate Attribute?

If performing artists need to strategise, network, negotiate, take risks, try, fail and try again to get towards a goal in a changing policy, industrial and production climate, then it seems that improvisation—not just on stage but on the stage of daily life—is critical to managing a portfolio career. If there is one thing drama, theatre and performance studies graduates should be good at it is improvising. Whether we know them from Keith Johnson's theatre theories or Erving Goffman's social theories[33], the processes by which we play out a scenario to our own benefit in contemporary or cultural performances are familiar. Objective, offer, acceptance, advancing, reversing, character, status, manipulation, impression management and relationships management are familiar. What might happen, then, if we could translate these performance principles to career self-performance principles? What if the ability to play, improvise and produce spontaneous new performances learned in the academy could be translated into an ability to play, improvise and produce spontaneous new self-performances after graduates leave the academy and move into the role of a performing arts professional? What if we could position this – and the ability to adapt positively to uncertain and changeable circumstances, as much as pursue goals in a focused way, it implies—as a critical graduate attribute?

A study of the career paths of our graduates over the past decade suggests that characterising the challenges they encounter as they move between aca-

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[32] Cf. Bree Hadley.

[33] Erving Goffman, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1973).

demic culture, professional culture, industry and career in terms of improvisation principles may in fact be very productive. It offers a way of training performing arts graduates to be careerist whilst drawing on terms, techniques and processes more familiar and meaningful to them than those drawn from current career theory.

The Principles of Improvisation

As I have noted at the outset of this paper, although improvisation implies making things up in the moment[34], it does always involve pre-established approaches, patterns and structures to support spontaneous response to a scenario, situation or set of hurdles unfolding in this moment. These pre-established, practiced approaches to spontaneous play and serendipitous outcomes in the moment come from six principles underpinning effective improvisation, at least in a drama, theatre and performance context – clearly, there are also large volumes of literature and practical advice in other areas, such as music, that fall outside the scope of this drama, theatre and performance focused discussion[35].

- First, improvisation involves familiarity with the form and the field in which we are improvising – for instance, a familiarity with the forms of dance or theatre in which we are improvising based on our own prior study and practice[36]
- Second, improvisation also involves familiarity with what Spolin[37] calls the 'rules of the game' out of which the play, stage performance or social performance appears and starts to take on some shape. Improvisers, Spolin and others say, must suggest ideas, discover ideas and be spon-

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[34] Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim Johnson, 13-14.

[35] Although this project's focus on drama, theatre and performance education necessitates a focus on literature specific to that field, a host of books – both practical and theoretical – on music improvisation have emerged during this same period, for example, Eugene Friesen and Wendy M. Friesen (2012) *Improvisation for Classical Musicians*, Berklee Press; Ed Sarath (2009) *Music Theory Through Improvisation: A New Approach to Musicianship Training*, Routledge; Nicole M. Brockman (2009) *From Sight to Sound: Improvisational Games for Classical Musiciansi, Indiana University Press*; Jeffrey Agrell (2007) *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*, CIA Publications; Derek Bailey (1993) *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Da Capo Press. A full survey of this literature is beyond the scope of this article.

[36] Karl E. Weick 1998; Vera Dusya and Mary Crossan, 203, 206.

[37] Viola Spolin, 5-6.

taneous within set 'limitations"[38], because tool much or total freedom would make for anarchy rather than creativity that actually leads to an outcome. In theatre, the 'rules of the game' might involve speaking a word or a phrase at a time, rhyming, listing, associating, captioning, playing with status, shifts in the context, style or genre of a scene, the possibilities are endless, but whatever they are they give a starting point and possible steps to take to get the play or the performance going and stop people from sitting around waiting for the muse to strike[39]

- Third, improvisation also always has a goal players seek within the form, field and rules of the game. This might, as Spolin[40] says, be to throw a number on a dice, get someone to do something, or develop new insight into a specific sort of character the players want to learn more about.

- Fourth, improvisation always involves suddenly, spontaneously and immediately saying 'yes' to offers that might assist in moving forward towards the goal, whatever they may be. The players must agree to work with whatever idea, suggestion or possible solution might be put before them rather than peremptorily dismiss it as silly or unsuitable[41]

- Fifth, improvisation always involves sensitivity to the environment. Improvisers must investigate, examine and address, not ignore, the environment in which they find themselves with whatever resources they have available to them to do this[42]

- Sixth, improvisation always involves sensitivity to others in this environment. Sharing, mutual support and a desire, as Diggles[43] puts it, to "make your partner look good" are the hallmarks of effective improvisation which leads to new stories, scenes and scenarios rather than getting cut off after the first gag. It is a "communal" effort in which combined wisdom leads to new ideas. There is acknowledgement and sympathy for the fact that others are doing their best in the face of uncertainty here too. Accordingly, there is collaboration rather than conflict, arrogance or abandoning the game in the face of challenge or criticism.

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[38] Ibid. 6; cf. Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher, "The Elements of Improvisation: Structural Tools for Spontaneous Theatre, *Theatre Topics*, 21.1 (March 2011) 49-60, 49; Amy E. Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City* (Jackson MI: UP of Mississippi, 2001), xx.

[39] Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1981), 119-138.

[40] Viola Spolin, 6-7.

[41] Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim Johnson, 35; cf. Dan Diggles, 9; Vera Dusya and Mary Crossan, 207.

[42] Viola Spolin, 6-7.

[43] Dan Diggles, 9.

These six principles support improvisors in their effort to say or do something spontaneous, see what happens, trust that something will happen, and trust that they will still be able to progress the story, scenario or social situation towards the goal they seek no matter what happens. They do not necessarily make spontaneous saying or doing something and seeing what happens simple or stress free. Improvisation is difficult, Diggles says, because "we live in a society of templates"[44] of how in our case a performing arts graduate – a performer, director, playwright or producer – should be and behave, and we feel pressure to live up to these templates as definitions of success. We do not want to show ourselves up by getting things wrong, or doing the wrong things, for fear society will see us as silly, stupid, unsatisfactory or strange[45]. "In a culture where approval / disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position," as Spolin says, "…our personal freedoms are dissipated"[46], and we do not feel free to be ourselves without fear of failure, defeat, embarrassment or judgement from others[47] – we prefer to plan to be sure we are doing something clever rather than spontaneously, playfully try things. If there is a seventh principle for successful improvisation, then, it is probably to do with persistence, resilience and a willingness to take a risk by trying, potentially failing, and trying again. With attention to the processes, rules and protocols that underpin improvisation, and with practice, though, we can work at becoming better at navigating this terrain and remaining resilient in spite of the risks involved. This competence, confidence and resilience, created through practice – this combination of creativity and routine, divergent and convergent thinking, openness and more single-minded goal focus – is precisely what graduates in an 'improvising a career' context require. It is precisely what most advocates of entrepreneurship education seek, in combination with specific skills in management and marketing, to engender. If graduates can strategise, start doing, see what happens, suspending judgement and accepting risk, then they will better be able to learn about themselves, others, options, and possibilities in their future performing arts career path. They will be less likely to give up, if they cannot get from A to E in a straight shot, and cannot come up with other possibilities, pathways and options, before turning again to a goal directed pursuit of them.

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[44] Ibid. 11.

[45] Ibid. 13, 15, 24; cf. Keith Johnstone, 87.

[46] Viola Spolin, 7.

[47] Dan Diggles, 7; Viola Spolin 3-7; Keith Johnstone, 31; John Hodgson and Earnest Richards, 1.

Improvising A Performing Arts Career

If we compare the skills used in improvising a role, and the skills used in improvising a series of roles, relationships and achievements across a career, the value of familiar, meaningful and much-practiced skills in improvisation, play and playful self- performance in managing a portfolio career becomes clear. It allows us to say that graduates hoping to set themselves up for success firstly need some familiarity with their artform and field, and secondly need some familiarity with the 'rules of the game' in their given field, to succeed. In a career context, this would be an understanding of the policy, industrial and production frameworks that inform work in the performing arts and the way they impact on both aesthetic and administrative work on a daily basis. Thirdly, graduates need a goal, a strategy to get towards that goal, and a willingness to try a series of other strategies and steps – Plans A, B, C and D – to get towards their goals - E. In a career context, this would be an ability to articulate what the graduate would, at least at the moment, like to do – and at least two or three different ways to get there, even if further information, further networks, or further study is going to be needed along the way. An ability, in other words, to work along sometimes roundabout seeming pathways to get towards a goal, to throw possibilities open, focus, then throw possibilities open, then focus again, as needs require. Fourthly, graduates need to be able to build rather than block, stumble or stall when opportunities come along. In a career context, this would be an ability to try something, even if it is not what they planned, and even if it involves putting themselves out there or taking a risk, rather than just give up and exit the exercises on the basis that routine approaches did not allow them to arrive at end goal right away. Fifthly, graduates need to be able to willing to reflect on, revise and revision their plans if a strategy proves unsuccessful in a specific policy, industrial or production climate. Sixthly, graduates need to be able to engaged others encountered along the way with goodwill. They need, as Weick[48] noted, to be able to acknowledge and sympathise with the fact that others are struggling with uncertainty here too, working via collaboration rather than via conflict, arrogance, or a too-swift tendency to walk away in the face of challenge or criticism. Finally, and most importantly, graduates need to be resilient, and thus willing to try, fail, and try again, and keep taking risks to get the possible rewards these may bring. In a career context, this means accepting that everything leads somewhere, even if the destination is not known in advance, and the full story is not known til after the fact, and that surprises may still lead to physically, psychologically, artistically or financially satisfying outcomes.

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[48] Weick, 1996, 54.

Conclusion

Improvisation useful, well-understood concept and of course also skill for any drama, theatre and performance studies graduate. Although it has not to date been emphasised as a critical graduate capability, it brings an ability to engage productively with complex, changing and unpredictable events that can help graduates succeed not just on the theatrical stage, but on the cultural stage, as they manage a portfolio career. Increasingly, as Bennett[49] argues, the ability to manage a portfolio career – to use information, networks, and transferable skill sets to engineer, entrepreneur and take advantage of opportunities across jobs and job contexts – is a necessity rather than an accessory for graduates. It is, however, a challenging prospect as aspirations, ambitions and hopes built in the academy give way to the uncertainty, challenge and complexity of building a career in industry. As data developed in our longitudinal study of graduate destinations and the skills graduates used to get to these destinations demonstrates, students sometimes find it difficult to engage with the entrepreneurial, management and self-management graduates, industry stakeholders and scholars say they will need to manage their portfolio career. It seems, for some, to be too much of a foreign discourse and set of concepts, too case-by-case in its application, or too likely to claim time away from their artistic ambitions. As I have suggested here, a shift in discourse – from the foreign concept of strategising, managing and planning within a specific economic and industrial framework to get to a goal to the more familiar concept of improvising within a specific player framework to get to a goal – is certainly possible. It captures the both the aptitudes, and the attitudes, graduates require to succeed in current career contexts. It does so, though, in a more familiar, and for students achievable, way. Accordingly, re-articulating some of the skills scholars and industry stakeholders argue are critical in allowing graduates to shift successfully from academy to industry in terms of skills like improvisation, play, and playful self-performance may well hold much potential to improve the employability of graduates.

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[49] Dawn Bennett, 322-323.