I have been an arts educator my entire adult life. I have worked directly with kids of all ages to share their creative ideas using the tools of expression—writing, improvisation, drawing, film, radio, you name it—as opportunities to try, fail, take risks, and boldly assert that their ideas matter. This is what learning means in the arts. It is about turning inspiration and ideas into products and performances to share with real audiences. The arts are more than a pathway toward learning; they are the new model for what learning can look like in the 21st century.

This work has taken me on a journey from actor to academic and back again. No doubt, I am now a lot smarter about how the arts can inform teaching and learning. My colleagues and I publish articles about what young people learn about representation, communication, and creativity through artmaking and chronicle how participation in these experiences results in positive psychosocial outcomes including agency, self-efficacy, and a strong sense of self. We design programs that benefit thousands of kids each year across the country by giving them access to the tools, mentors, and audiences they need to be successful. NCECA and communities like it exist to support this work and provide a space for artist-educators to enhance their own work.

This essay represents my best and current thinking about how the arts are taken up productively by teachers, designers, artists, and young people. The arts transform education every day for thousands of learners—helping them to meet standards, to stay in school, and to change their lives. In this essay I want to outline why I believe we have struggled so mightily to assert the value of the arts in education and to introduce improvisation as a model for teaching as a powerful strategy for using the arts to transform our classrooms.

**A Brief Review Of The Arts In Education In The Us Since The 1990s**

Thanks to digital tools like YouTube, Google and Wikipedia, more people than ever are producing, performing, making, sharing and enjoying art than ever before. Each phase of participation in the arts involves a deep form of learning. Learning to produce, to share, to critique and to collaborate are indispensable 21st century skills.

However, the national rhetoric around the arts and education has not changed much from what it was a generation ago. In the
1990s, we thought about the arts instrumentally – we believed a way to legitimate the arts in an education world dominated by text literacy and numeracy standards was to demonstrate how the arts could produce success in traditional disciplines. Playing music could make you better at math, participating in drama could make you a better reader. Arts educators and policy makers did some research – a report edited by James Catterall and Richard Deasy for the National Education Association describes these studies – and do you know what they found? What makes you better at math is more math and what makes you better at reading is more reading. Educators didn’t really buy the instrumental argument and, frankly, neither did artists.

In the 2010s, a new form of instrumentalizing arose. Thanks to the Obama administration’s focus on preparing young people for careers in the 21st Century, our education focus shifted to the world of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) education. In 2014, at the first ever White House Maker Faire, President Obama declared: “I am calling on people across the country to join us in sparking creativity and encouraging invention in their communities” primarily as a new pathway for careers in science and technology. The shift toward “making” and “creativity” is encouraging, but it portends the emergence of another wave of instrumentalizing in the arts – what I call the STEM Monster. The STEM Monster lurks under the bed of the creativity in education movement and threatens to instrumentalize the power of art-making by making it into a gateway to engineering. Just as the arts were instrumentalized in service of reading and math outcomes, the STEM Monster can instrumentalize the arts to promote “21st Century Learning” and modern career preparation.

So where does this leave the set of disciplines we call “the arts” – theatre, music, visual arts, dance, and digital media – in terms of their role in education? British arts and media education scholar Julian Sefton-Green described how the arts needed to, “reinstate their claims to be proper subject disciplines” in education and to abandon the romanticizing we had done of children’s creativity as unassailable contributions immune to critique. He called for the establishment of arts disciplines in learning that involved rigorous, deep work that prepared young people to be creative producers and evaluators of ideas using a range of tools for self-expression. In other words, making and critiquing art is hard and we shouldn’t shy away from engaging young people in the educative work of becoming artists.

Our current education system seems strangled by its own constraints of what counts as learning, defined primarily by reading and math. These accountability-based outcomes that have not resulted in greater educational equity or more innovative opportunities for our young people. Focusing on test scores and accountability measures has not improved students’ life chances, especially not for those who have struggled the most with formal education. The arts are currently transforming learning in the public spaces around schools; we can now turn to how the arts can serve as a model for reconceptualizing teaching, learning, and design in schools. Arts-based teaching, in particular, can take advantage of arts learning in deep and meaningful ways that move beyond instrumentalization and romanticization.

**How the arts can reinvent teaching**

Every art form involves the skillful leveraging of intention and resources to create a product or a performance. Learning the “skill” involved here is a long-term achievement measured by an artist’s ability to come up with good ideas, use the resources at hand to create a representation, and to successfully share the product with an audience. The skill of a successful artist might begin as a recipe of steps needed to translate intention into product; but over time, this skill must transform into a form of discretion that the artist uses to interact with ideas, materials, and audience.

Thinking and performing like an artist, in this sense, seems to be the ideal outcome for education in a knowledge-age. We want every student to make the transition from rule-follower to discerning judge about what is the appropriate product or reaction in a given situation. The skills developed by a successful artist turn out to be a good description of what we expect of the ideal 21st century learner.

Producing a generation of artists seems like a daunting tasks for educators. Especially in a system increasingly designed to measure learning in terms of the recitation of spoon-fed, calibrated content! I want to make the radical argument that recasting teaching practice as improvisation – both its own art form and a genre of art-making that stretches across forms – is a productive framework for understanding what constitutes good teaching. Improvisation (improv) is a form of art-making that stretches across performance media including theatre and music. In theatre, improv is most closely associated with comedy, though it also includes dramatic long- and short-form sketches. In music, improv is associated with Jazz, though many other forms of music use improvisation for both composition and performance. Improv in theatre is a process for making art, a set of tools used by actors to work on characters and scenes as well as a performance medium in and of itself that relies on a range of forms to produce scenes, songs, and monologues on the spot. Keith Sawyer describes “collaborative emergence” as the outcome of improv, which contributes to young children’s narrative literacy and aptly describes the relationship between artists and their tools.

I draw inspiration for my articulation of the principles of improv from an unlikely source: Tina Fey. In her memoir, she outlines why the four rules of improv appealed to her, “not only as a way of creating comedy, but as a worldview”. For Fey, these four rules are a worldview; for me they reframe how I understand the design of the teaching and learning enterprise.

**Rule #1: “The first rule of improvisation is agree”**

The first thing you learn in any improv training is to SAY YES. “The Rule of Agreement reminds you to ‘respect what your partner has created’ and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that takes you” (Fey 2011: 76). What means that in a theatrical scene is that you never deny what your partner has created. It does not mean that you can never use the word “no” or disagree. SAYING YES is fundamentally about a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. It reminds us as educators that our basic interactions ought to be around understanding how people are contributing and why they’re choosing to contribute that way. If we take a truly constructivist stance on learning, all new knowledge is built on prior knowledge, experiences, and practices. By saying no we are effectively severing that link for students, explaining to them that they need totally new information or ways of thinking if they are to answer our question correctly. Of course the answer can be wrong – especially if the question is informational or for the purposes of summarizing.
Saying yes reminds us though that our job as teachers is not to elicit the right answer but rather to build connections for learners between what they bring to the learning environment and what you want them to get out of it.

**Rule #2: Say, “yes, and…”**

“The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own…YES, AND means don’t be afraid to contribute” (Fey 2011: 76-77). In an improv scene, adding something of your own moves the scene along. The purpose of a scene is to get from point A to point B, even though you don’t know in advance what those two points are. But movement is not possible if no one contributes new information and it is much more difficult if only one person is doing so. The most skilled improvisers make it look as if they are not doing anything while their choices build into a discourse in which each member participates to move the scene along.

**Rule #3: Make statements**

In progressive pedagogy it is de rigueur to avoid lecture and focus on student discovery of rules, concepts, and ideas. However, there is a “time for telling” when learners are cognitively prepared to be told the answers to complex questions, and that this telling can amplify discovery. Tina Fey’s version of a time for telling? “The next rule is MAKE STATEMENTS…Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don’t just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles” (2011: 77). Knowing when to place the cognitive load entirely on learners and knowing when to take some of it on yourself as a leader is as much a marker of an effective educator as it is the marker of an effective improviser. Tina Fey reminds us that always asking questions can be frustrating and can stop forward progress in a scene. It is disingenuous for a teachers to pretend she doesn’t know the answer. One strategy is to distinguish between questions for which you have an answer from those you don’t. While both types of questions invite learners to participate in the environment, they are substantively different. Making statements helps learners understand the boundaries between what is already known and what remains to be explored.

**Rule #4: “There are no mistakes, only opportunities”**

Tina Fey’s example about mistakes is especially evocative here:

If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what? Now I’m a hamster in a hamster wheel. I’m not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I’ll end up being a police hamster who’s been put on ‘hamster wheel’ duty because I’m ‘too much of a loose cannon’ in the field (2011: 77-78).

Learners are always using prior knowledge to make sense of new ideas and when their conceptual understanding does not match our own. A learner’s guess about what is going on tells the teacher what kinds of knowledge and skills are being brought to the table. New information needs to be fitted to already existing information and learners need to understand the connections in order to rebuild concepts. And learners don’t just make up random answers rather they are providing ideas from a place of trying to make sense. Cognitively, a mistake is fundamentally an opportunity.

Seeing mistakes as opportunities allows us to take back failure as an integral, necessary part of learning, rather than as a demonstration of a lack of learning. In modern schooling discourse, we use “failure” to describe a negative outcome. The “success-failure” construct shows learning as binary (you are a good student or you aren’t, you did well on the test or you didn’t) rather than as a process of doing and becoming. By seeing mistakes as opportunities teachers and students can ask of a learning process, “What happened here,” “What did I mean to have happen,” and “Where are the alignments and misalignments between the two?”

These rules of improv have proven remarkably generative across art forms. But applying them to a teaching setting is non-trivial. Committing to the work and genuine risk-taking is required. About teaching improv as an art form, Jeannie Leep says: “When your students...understand that you are experimenting, that you are willing to take risks yourself, then the expectation of ‘expert’ is removed from the work, and the group will take more ownership of the process”. It can be really upsetting for teachers to lose control of the expert expectation; the rules of improv can scaffold the change in the power dynamic. Improv shows teachers and students how to exercise judgment in the midst of even the most structured learning environment. Embedding improv into the everyday practices of teaching can serve as the pathway for teachers to treat learners as emerging artists.

There is much more to be said about how the arts serve as a model for 21st century learning. The ability to produce, to critique and to share complex representations is becoming an working definition of what we mean by literacy. As schools move away from policies that specify what students should learn and how learning should be shown, the arts will emerge as a robust, traditional model for envisioning the next generation of learning environments. Improv is a proven, resilient first step to help teachers rethink their practice to help evoke the arts in their classrooms. Recognizing the intrinsic value of arts practices shows how schooling can be transformed to improve education for everyone.

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*Erica is currently working on a book with this same title.*