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ON IMPROVISATION, LEARNING, AND LITERACY

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
the University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Curriculum & Instruction

Charlotte

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ABSTRACT

RYAN CHARLES WELSH. On improvisation, learning and literacy. (Under the direction of DR. LILIAN BRANNON)

Previously, improvisation has served as a term for describing a quality of the action taking place in classrooms between teachers and students. This project begins to theorize a way of understanding embodied literacies and scenes of learning through a lens of improvisation that enhances the description and better equips researchers to analyze this quality. This project synthesizes numerous research threads and theories from theater (Halpern, 1994, 2005; Johnstone, 1992; Spolin, 1999), anthropology (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2003), psychology (Sawyer, 2011b; Vygotsky, 1978), and literary theory (Bakhtin, 1981) in an effort to provide a theory of improvisation that could be deployed in future qualitative studies or serve as a way for literacy teachers to think about their classrooms. A theory of improvisation enables qualitative researchers in the field of education to acquire a more thorough understanding of the way literacies are an improvised process in scenes of learning. This project is necessary because no such theory yet exists. As part of theorizing literacy and improvisation, I draw upon scenes from my own teaching and from theatrical improvisation. I analyze these moments to illustrate various theoretical premises such as instances of "yes, and-ing" that carry a scene of learning forward. This theory building and analysis amount to a first iteration of improv theory.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the teachers and students who improvise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my committee ensemble: Dr. Lil Brannon, Dr. Heather Coffey, Dr. Cy Knoblauch, and Dr. Bruce Taylor. I greatly appreciate the various scenes of research we shared. I would like to acknowledge my Providence Day School ensemble (and the school's financial support). My colleagues (faculty and students) continue to inspire my improvisation every day. I would like to acknowledge my familial ensemble: Roxanne, Rebecca, and Randy for being my first ensemble and helping me to first understand the power of ensembles. I would like to acknowledge my sons, Wyndham and Boden, who will always help me to remember the importance of play.

I would like to acknowledge Irka, my wife, who is my favorite and best scene partner.

PREFACE

The purpose of these chapters is to take the first steps of a scholarly project that applies principles and practices of improvisation to the English classroom in order to move towards articulating a philosophy of teaching English language arts. These chapters will serve as my doctoral dissertation. I have been conscious of my activity as improvised since I first started learning and practicing the art of improvisational theater with Duke University Improv. Since then, improvisational theater has offered me a framework for thinking about and dealing with most everything. By training, I am a literary theorist, and I find improvisation helps me to think about the ways reading, writing, and thinking are always improvised and collaborative. By profession, I am an educator, and I believe improvisation has enabled me to develop fruitful scenes of literacy learning with fellow learner-improvisers. By choice, I have held up improvisation as a way of life that helps me to be the best version of myself while helping others to pursue the same. First and foremost, I am undertaking this work in an effort to share a mindset and a consciousness that continues to change my life.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION-SETTING THE STAGE

"If we treat each other as if we are geniuses, poets and artists, we have a better chance of becoming that on-stage" (Del Close quoted in Halpern, 2005, epigraph).

I walk into the middle of a black box theater space and smile pleasantly at an audience of a 100 or so people. Then, I offer this audience the following introduction: "Hello. Welcome to *The Ryan Welsh Experience*. My name is Ryan Welsh, and I need a suggestion of absolutely anything to get our show started." A number of audience members shout suggestions, but the first one I recognize is the word "dust." I thank the audience for their suggestions, and I announce that the first suggestion I heard was "dust." I bow my head a moment thinking about what "dust" calls to my mind. My job is to offer an extemporaneous, true story about myself inspired by this initial suggestion. The first thing that comes to my mind is a play I was in when I was 12 years old called *The Diviners*. I played a character named Buddy Layman, which necessitated me being coated in a stage make-up powder product in order to make me appear dirty. The color of the powder was called "Plains Dust." I offer the audience a monologue about my character Buddy and about his role in *The Diviners*, including the dusty make-up. I tell this story for 3 or 4 minutes.

I walk away from the middle of the theater space after my monologue ends, and my ensemble takes over. The rest of the members of Duke University Improv (DUI) begin a series of improvised scenes based on themes, ideas, and words they have taken

from my extemporaneous monologue. These unscripted scenes develop wholly new characters and stories that were inspired by my opening story. I watch and listen carefully to this series of scenes gathering inspiration for my next extemporaneous monologue while also waiting for the right moment to cut into a scene in order to halt the series and start the new monologue. We repeat this sequence three times following the initial audience suggestion: monologue-scenes, monologue-scenes, monologue-scenes. This overarching structure is predetermined, whereas the monologues and scenes are improvised on the spot. Most of the improvising world refers to this long-form improvisational structure as *The Armando Diaz*, but we called our version *The Ryan Welsh Experience*.

Even though I'm telling true stories about myself, I, and the ensemble, improvise this show or experience with a number of fundamental principles in mind. We are all focused on listening, affirming, and playing. These fundamental principles prove necessary for DUI to improvise pairs of monologues and scenes in a way that we, and the audience, found enjoyable and worthwhile. I posit that improvisation necessitates committed and complicated adherence to listening, affirming, and playing. These three principal concepts serve as categories for all the ideas and activities improvisational theater performers undertake in an effort to improvise. For the moment, I propose thinking about these three gerunds (listening, affirming, and playing) as the three supports of a three-legged stool. That is, I am separating these ideas out in an effort to explain something about improvisation and learning. However, like the stool, these rudimentary categories of ideas and activities connect and overlap in dependent

relationships that must be bound up together if the stool is to support weight or if the improvised scene is to survive.

With a nascent understanding of improvisation and this small triad in place, I will also use this introduction to situate a constellation of premises and stipulations as necessary scaffolding for the theory developed in the upcoming chapters. I will introduce the components of my argument here without flourish or substantiation, although I recognize the reader will be due a bit of both in the subsequent chapters. These statements begin to hint at the terms, engagements, and the terms of engagement I will need in order to build an improv theory of learning.

First, critical literacy development can arise from scenes of learning. Next, the development of critical literacy enables students the chance for transformation through learning. Given the importance of transformation through learning, making meaning of critical literacy development in scenes of learning is important. Qualitative methods of research facilitate making meaning with the data that might be encountered in scenes of learning. In particular, thick description helps to make meaning of critical literacy development in scenes of learning. I suggest that scenes of learning may be considered scenes of deep play. Play can be thought of as improvised. As such, the thick description of critical literacy development requires a way of observing and analyzing improvisation.

This dissertation represents the first steps towards developing a way of observing and analyzing improvisation. An improv theory of learning, resting on the three legs of listening, affirming, and playing, provides an important starting point for transposing the ideas and activities from the improvisational theater field into a qualitative theory and

method for providing the thick description necessary for making meaning of the important processes that surround the development of critical literacy. I have no intention of fully realizing a complete improv theory of learning or of thoroughly deploying this nascent theoretical development. Rather, I intend to draw together pre-existing bibliography from fields of research and writing that rarely find themselves in conversation. I intend to use this amalgam of research to begin composing an improv theory of learning just robust enough to try out in a way that will recommend the matter to more capable minds. (See Figure 1 below for improv theory visual with more complete explanation arriving in Chapter 4.)

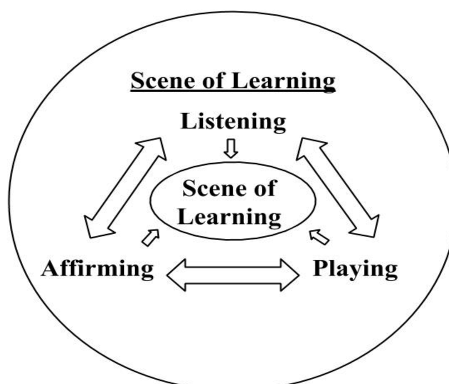

Figure 1- Improv Theory

Previous research (Lobman, 2005, 2006; Sawyer, 1997b, 2011b) suggests that principles originating from the field of improvisational theater may have worthwhile application in the study of learning and literacy. Plenty of work has been written about improvisational theater (See Halpern, 1994, 2005; Johnstone, 1992; Leep, 2008; Spolin, 1999). However, almost all of this work aims to teach improvisational theater techniques to actors. The work of improvisational theater has been insufficiently transposed for use

in education research. More specifically, improvisational theater, I argue, offers a set of principles with a great deal of promise for helping education researchers working in literacy and identity. Further, I show that improvisational theater provides a means of helping educators facilitate the development of literacies and identities. However, because of the audience for whom these works are written, the principles and practices arising from the field of improvisational theater do not readily translate into usable material for literacy researchers and educators. And yet, given time and opportunity, enough research and writing exists to synthesize and deploy an improv theory of learning that would represent the start of a sufficient translation.

This research aims to bring an improv theory to literacy learning where no such application exists in an effort to begin answering the following question: how might an improv theory, derived from improvisational theater principle and practice, provide a means of analyzing the development of literacy and identity through improvised classroom practices within scenes of literacy learning? I pose this question with a few assumptions already in place. First, I am convinced, based on my own experience as a practicing improviser and educator, that an improv theory of learning would indeed offer a means of analyzing teaching practices. Drawing on Dorothy Holland's work, I argue that learning arises from a collection of improvised moments situated in figured worlds. The improvisation is often invisible to teachers and students or goes unnoticed. At times, moments of learning are scripted or involve the enactment of particular social and discursive practices that have been learned and rehearsed, which might make them seem less improvised. However, I would maintain that even in the most scripted and routine-oriented moments, there exists the opportunity for

improvisation. This study will show how Holland's theory of identity, how we perform identities by making them in the moment, improvised with the material (e.g. narratives) of our experiences, when placed with improv theory, can provide educators with ways of remaking their classrooms in support of students' literacy and learning.

The writing in the field of improvisational theater varies greatly from one text to the next in terms of quality and focus, but I believe enough of these texts examined together produces a workable "ethnotheory" (Sawyer, 1997a) that provides the foundation for the transposed application I have championed. This premise about the importance of a derived ethnotheory will not go unexamined. A significant part of what would normally be a traditional literature review will be taken up substantiating this position. In short, the initial question I posed above and my hypothesized process for answering the question relies on two premises. First, I will rely on Holland to argue that scenes of literacy learning are improvised. Second, given the improvised quality of learning, improvisational theater, which specializes in the analysis of improvised scenes, offers a fertile starting point for developing an improv theory of learning that would enable observation and analysis of teaching and support students' literacy learning. As I mentioned, neither of these assumptions or premises will go unchallenged, but declaring these positions early is important. Important, in part, because these two premises allow me to affix my sights on better understanding, observing, and analyzing the ways identity and literacy are interconnected and developed through improvised actions.

With my initial question and premises in place, I will accomplish the task of developing an initial version of an improv theory of learning. With a combination of research synthesis and auto-ethnographic theory-building, I can distill a theory of

improvisation derived from the principle and practice of improvisational theater in order to produce a means of observation and analysis (i.e. thick description) that focuses on unpacking the improvisational quality of literacy and identity development in scenes of literacy learning. The early part of this dissertation establishes the need for such tools of observation and analysis where literacy and identity are concerned. The middle chapters do the work of research synthesis and auto-ethnographic theory-building. Finally, I conclude the project by offering examples of the ways an improv theory of learning would prove useful in thinking about scenes of literacy learning by itself and in conjunction with other analytical frameworks. This introduction will conclude with a more specific, but brief, outline of the chapters themselves.

The next chapter positions the development of an improv theory of learning in multiple contexts. I begin with ideas about how improvisation can be understood as a particular quality of a particular phenomenon using the concept of "figured worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2003). I start to ground the ways an improv theory of learning fits within pre-existing frameworks (including performance studies) for understanding scenes of literacy learning as socially constructed. With this grounding in place, I position the possibility of an improv theory of learning in the context of recent work in improv studies in education. Primarily, I focus on work (Lobman, 2005, 2006; Sawyer, 1997a, 2011b) from researchers who explicitly call for the development of the kind of theory I am working toward. The various fields I use in this chapter to contextualize the theory also provide a starting point for defining terms that will prove important to developing the theory (e.g. improvisation, critical literacy, urban education, thick description). This chapter also includes a re-reading of scenes from a chapter of

Holland et al's *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* highlighting the ways an improv theory of learning might allow for observation and analysis of the quality of improvisation beyond acknowledging that certain moments and choices can be described as improvised.

In the third chapter, I examine prior research from numerous fields in an effort to continue to establish the context for an improv theory of learning while also highlighting the starting points from which a new theory might arise. More than a review of the literature, this chapter will piece together research that continues to articulate the need for an improv theory of learning while also suggesting places where an improv theory of learning would complement the analysis already found in classic works (e.g. Cazden's *Classroom Discourse*). Additionally, this chapter articulates the body of writing from the field of improvisational theater that serves as the building blocks for an improv theory of learning. I also use the critical review in this chapter to deploy the terms of my project as I defined them in Chapter 2. The use of these terms will further help to solidify the ideas that will be central to the improv theory and its use.

Chapter 4 begins with a re-reading of some of the foundational texts from improvisational theater; these re-readings serve as the basis for the improv theory of learning. Re-reading texts from the field of improvisational theater served as the starting point for memos I have written in an effort to distill the body of work arising from this field as I see it applied to learning and literacy. The reading memos are complemented by memos written with regard to my personal experience as an improviser as well as an educator, at times, keenly aware of his improvisation in the classroom. I use a few illustrative examples throughout this chapter as a part of articulating the theory. This

chapter concludes with a summary of the improv theory of learning that I deploy in the final chapter to illustrate the utility of the theory.

In Chapter 5, I provide two kinds of examples of improv theory in action. First, I re-read and analyze data from previous work that benefits from having used a theory with a more robust language for and understanding of improvisation. Similar to the re-reading of Holland et al. in the first chapter, these examples simultaneously offer illustration as well as further explanation of the theory. The chapter ends with a more thorough treatment of a scene of learning that gets analyzed using improv theory and discourse analysis. Principally, I illustrate the ways the improv theory of learning works within the context of critical discourse analysis methods. This example embodies a number of tenets of critical discourse analysis while also observing and analyzing the improvised quality of the scene with the improv theory of learning.

CHAPTER 2: INITIATING THE SCENE / MAKING AN OFFER

“Any new idea brought to the stage (line of dialogue, gesture, mime, change of expression) we call an OFFER” (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008, 56-57).

Offer 1

I improvise. More importantly, we improvise. In fact, when I say “I improvise,” I must always mean some form of “we improvise.” Any act of improvisation involves the influential interactions of others. I improvise everyday as I move from one scene to the next interacting, disconnecting, connecting with other people in our shared scenes. There is no script on the bedside table when we wake in the morning such that we might review our specific lines, cues, and plot points for the day. As such, we improvise. We improvise every day, all day, as we navigate life performing one moment to the next never knowing precisely what will be said and done. I take “improvise” to be a verb that shows the actions or inactions of lived moments being created spontaneously from one moment to the next. “Improvisational,” as an adjective, describes the spontaneous and constructed nature of those moments where, even with a script, we create something in a way that, no matter how anticipated, represents a fundamental act of creation. Finally, “improvisation” names a circumstance or set of activities and ideas that captures something fundamental about the way life happens from one performed moment to the next. Life is improvised.

Offer 2

I improvise. More importantly, we improvise. On Wednesdays, at practice, and Saturdays, in performances at *The Comedy Zone*, my improv theater ensemble from Charlotte Comedy Theater improvises. We employ principles and techniques from an established body of expertise in improvisational theater arts. Using various formats, games, and exercises, we improvise in order to entertain. We improvise in order to create something from nothing; when there is an audience, we hope people enjoy the created something. We take a suggestion from the audience in order to ignite spontaneous creation worthy of watching. The ensemble aims to trust and listen our way to an elusive state held up by the improv theater community as the holiest of grails--group mind. I, we, improvise and work to become better at improvising by making visible the improvised quality of our art form. By making the phenomenon or quality visible, we are better situated to reflect upon and analyze our improvisation.

Offer 3

I improvise. More importantly, we improvise. Every day, four class periods a day, my students and I form another kind of improvising ensemble. We find ourselves without a script even when a detailed plan exists. We improvise in an effort to generate new knowledge with one another. We improvise new identities and agency as we try out the new knowledge. This process represents the spontaneous creation of moments that add up to education in the context of scenes of literacy learning. Just like the ensemble in the theater, these learning ensembles use various principles and techniques in order to produce scenes that move us forward together, gathering understanding and making meaning as we go. Improvisation, whether an adjective, verb, or noun, serves as a fundamental way of being for our various forms of spontaneous, creative life. The

improvisation of teaching and learning can be particularly difficult to scrutinize. Teachers and students rarely notice or reflect upon the ways they are constantly improvising new literacy and identity.

“Making Offers”: Improvisation in Figured Worlds

In improvisational theater, actors make offers. “Making offers” serves as a piece of jargon that directors often use to help actors notice how they are initiating scenes or how they are responding to the contributions of other performers within the midst of the scene. The first three offers above invite a reader to consider the various ways we think about improvisation as well as the various moments of our lives that get created one moment at a time. This entire chapter provides an offer of where and how I see improvisation playing an important role in helping education researchers, as well as educators, think about the possibility of observing and analyzing classroom practice in a way that would help us to be more conscious of the initiations we offer and receive in our scenes. I maintain that increasing the awareness of the offers we make and those we receive would help us to be more intentional practitioners--as educators and researchers.

Each of the above variations or offers illustrates the ways improvisation serves as a fundamental quality of a phenomenon in numerous categories of human activity. These offers provide a starting point for thinking about the role improvisation plays as a quality of the figured worlds where we collectively develop life. As an object of research, improvisation has proven difficult to grapple with, and the application of an improve theory as some kind of research tool seems to be even more problematic and rare. However, increasingly in the last decade, education research has begun investigating the ways improvisation may have some fruitful connection with teaching and learning.

Often, improvisation first enters conversations in response to a desire to produce in classrooms, or investigate in research, ideas about creativity, collaboration, and innovation. Improvisation seems to have something to do with all of these desirable modes for educators and researchers. Before suggesting anything about improvisation and these desired modes, the opportunity and challenge presented by the concept of figured worlds need to be discussed in order to position the principal contribution of this work. Improvisation, as a conceptual framework (and so hereafter improv theory), provides a way of observing and analyzing literacy and identity development in the figured worlds of classrooms. More than observing and analyzing, improv theory yields analysis capable of helping educators and education researchers to think critically and constructively about the ways students and teachers form productive ensembles of improvisers in pursuit of learning. The balance of this introduction will contextualize this project within the framework of figured worlds while simultaneously situating the work more firmly in the context of a number of useful fields of study. This chapter also offers definitions of the terms that will prove essential to the discussion of improvisation and improv theory being offered in this dissertation.

To begin the declarative definitions, improv theory offers a way of providing "thick description" of the improvisation found in scenes of learning. I understand thick description in terms of Geertz. I believe the development of an improv theory contributes to the qualitative methods that make use of thick description as one way of making meaning through observation. Geertz (1973) proposes that the "object of ethnography" is:

> a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category, are as much nonwinks as winks are nontwitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. (p. 7)

In order to better observe and make meaning of the meaningful structures in scenes of learning, I believe researchers need to be able to provide thick description of the ways the "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" arises from improvised "twitches" and "winks." Strategies for thick description should enable a researcher to think about the improvised actions that add up to the meaningful moments Geertz attends to so carefully.

Geertz takes thick description to be central to the ethnographers work, and I take thick description to be central to many qualitative research methods even, at times, with researchers who might not think of themselves as ethnographers. Geertz (1973) writes:

> Ethnography is thick description. What the ethnographer is in fact faced with--except when (as, of course, he must do) he is pursuing the more automatized routines of data collection--is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render. (p. 9)

I believe improv theory contributes a means of providing thick description that helps to grasp and render the ways the complex structures are knotted and superimposed in improvised ways. Improv theory enables the cultivation of thick description that speaks to the ways activity and performance arise from the social interactions of people in a

scene of learning from one moment to the next. The concepts arising within the categories of listening, affirming, and playing offer a language for thickly describing improvisation as it appears in scenes of learning.

As Geertz (1973) suggests, "The ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In doing so, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted" (p. 18). Improv theory, situated in methods that take scenes of learning to be figured worlds, offers the researcher another tool for this inscription. Social discourse, arising in figured worlds, is improvised. As such, in order to understand figured worlds of literacy learning, researchers need a means of writing about the improvisation in a way that can be consulted in the future as well as draw attention to the fact that we do not know how scenes will unfold until we are in the midst of those improvised creations. The inscription of social discourse serves as a principal aim of the ethnographic research like that found in *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds* where the concept of figured worlds serves as a means of framing thick description and improv theory.

In the introductory chapter of *Identity and Agency in Cultural Worlds*, Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2003) offer a situated understanding of improvisation:

> Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set response. Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes about from generation to generation....improvisations, from a cultural base and in response to the

> subject positions offer *in situ*, are, when taken up as symbol, potential beginnings of an altered subjectivity, an altered identity...Improvisation can become the basis for a reformed subjectivity. (p. 17-18)

Holland et al. acknowledge the improvisational quality of the social interactions and systems they take as their subject matter. They notice the phenomenon without making a value judgment about any particular improvisation. Rather, they set up a functional understanding of improvisation where the improvisation or improvised moment serves as the site of new and novel action that signals changing social relations between the individuals participating in the improvised moment. In isolation, this understanding of improvisation serves nicely throughout their work on identity and agency. In a number of chapters, Holland et al. identify particular moments where an improvisation occurs in a way that leads to new identity developments. This functional definition and usage allows the concept of figured worlds to be deployed in an effort to account for the spontaneous ways individuals build personal identity and agency in the context of their social interactions. These improvisations are central to understanding the development of identity and agency in figured worlds.

About figured worlds, Holland et al. (2003) write, "By 'figured world,' then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). Improvisation describes a quality of the construction process described in this quote. Further, improvisation highlights the quality of the interaction and development of the characters and actors within a particular figured world. In *Identity and Agency*, the authors never make explicit reference to

anything in the world of improvisational theater, but the language of "characters and actors" indicates the ways figured worlds are performative. Individuals perform improvisations in the context of the various cultural scenes or figured worlds they find themselves in from one moment to the next and one day to the next. Holland et al. (2003) further clarify, "Figured worlds could also be called figurative, narrativized, or dramatized worlds...A figured world is formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities and events that ordain happenings within it" (p. 53). The concept of figured worlds frames each of the three offers laid out at the beginning of this chapter. Each of the offers hints at a figured world where I see improvisation as a central quality in terms of thickly describing how the action unfolds as well as the ways identity and agency (my own and others) gets produced through those socially situated interactions that valorize particular outcomes.

With this generalized understanding of figured worlds and improvisation in mind, I believe improv theory further enables analysis of identity development in figured worlds. Holland et al. conceptualize improvisations as products and ends. They use the term as a noun. They (2003) write, "We advocate paying more attention to the improvisation itself, to what was produced" (p. 16). I am for understanding the term improvisation as a noun, but I would argue this understanding is incomplete and leaves out a critical element in the social scenes where identity and agency play out. Whether phenomenon or object, Holland et al. construct improvisation as "an expected outcome when people are simultaneously engaged with or pushed by contradictory discourses" (p. 17). Again, I take this position to be valid but incomplete. Holland et al. seem to miss

the opportunity to think about the ways improvisation can be viewed as process rather than product, verb rather than noun.

I suspect this preference for product over process comes, in part, as a result of not having a means for providing the thick description that would be necessary to think about how particular subjects improvise instead of just identifying the subject's improvisations. Holland et al.'s understanding seems static to me (at least in their attention to improvisation). Improv theory offers a dynamic approach to describing and thinking about improvisation as a series of contextualized actions that might help us to understand the improvising agent in a different way. Holland et al. devote considerable attention in their first chapter to writing about a Nepalese woman named Gyanumaya.

While conducting research in Nepal, Holland and Skinner conduct a series of interviews aimed at better understanding certain aspects of the local culture. In order to do so, they conduct these interviews with a wide variety of locals from all the various castes in this particular society. At one point, an interview subject (Gyanumaya) from a lower caste came to their apartment, which was on the second floor of a building. Gyanumaya's caste dictated that she not pollute the kitchen of a higher caste individual's home. The kitchen was on the first floor of the building where Gyanumaya was to be interviewed. As such, she could not go through the first floor of the house in order to get to the second floor balcony where Holland and Skinner were conducting their interviews. While Skinner went down to the first floor in order to bring Gyanumaya up, Gyanumaya climbed the wall of the building and gained access to the second floor balcony from this outer wall. (Holland et al., 2003, p. 9-18).

Holland and Skinner unpack this wall-climbing as an act of improvisation. They seem to view the act as a situated, but crystallized, moment worthy of additional attention. The analysis of this climb attends to the various social pressures that existed and perhaps led to Gyanumaya climbing the wall. They go to considerable lengths to read this moment. The following quote is typical of their discussion of this moment:

> As the vision of Gyanumaya being propelled up the house by cultural principles of caste identity faded, I (Holland) began to marvel at the improvisational nature of her entry onto the balcony. Gyanumaya was, as far as we could learn, not accustomed to making her way to the second story of houses by scaling exterior walls. Instead she had come up with a spectacular improvisation in the face of a problematic situation. The house belonged, in her eyes, to an upper-caste person, and thus--at least in the usual circumstance of community life--she would not be allowed to enter. Yet she needed to get to the second floor balcony. She devised the solution of climbing up the outside of the house. (Holland et al., 2003, p. 15).

Marveling “at the improvisational nature” of Gyanumaya’s actions does not necessarily advance the cause of better describing or understanding what was happening in those moments before, during, and after Gyanumaya’s scaling the wall. Again, I do not take issue with the observations Holland et al. make with respect to this particular example. Rather, I take issue with the observations they do not or are unable to make. Observations that can be made with improv theory.

Holland and Skinner make note of the wall-climbing as an example of an improvisation that stands out against all of the improvisations an individual creates throughout his or her day. This particular improvisation stands out, which makes it easier

to notice. This example illustrates, for Holland and Skinner, the ways lived experience is rife with moments of improvisation where an individual, confronted with a unique situation, must employ the various literacies and identities at his or her disposal to "successfully" live through the situation. Again, I agree with Holland and Skinner that this wall-climbing example deserves attention as a unique improvisation, and I would add that the process of improvising this improvisation (scaling the wall) needs attention. Improv theory would describe the process of improvising to arrive at the improvisation in terms of the ways Gyanumaya "listens" carefully to the social demands of the situation while also "affirming" her identity in the context of those social demands. Finally, Gyanumaya "plays" through the novel circumstance to honor all of her preexisting habitus while also participating in an interview she values.

Gyanumaya's climb up the outer wall of the apartment could be examined as an improvised scene similar to a scene that could be found in a theater. Improv theory allows for a reading of this same scene in a way that attends to the improvised process that leads to the improvised product, which is what Holland et al. attend to when they are concerned with an improvisation. The actual act in this particular scene could be described as a woman trying to participate in a research interview. The scene itself is the apartment building where the interview is being held. Gyanumaya is the agent in the scene who has a particular identity that involves all of the usual contradictions one might expect to be wrapped up in a complicated character. Gyanumaya exhibits her agency through getting to the interview by climbing the outer wall of the apartment. The purpose of this act is to be a participant in the research interview. These statements (organized in the categories of Burke's dramatic pentad, which will be further discussed later in this

chapter) serve to situate the beginning of thick description that would recognize this episode as a kind of dramatic, improvised scene.

These statements still serve to examine the improvisation or product in a static way. I do not think Holland et al. would balk at this dramatic contextualization of their observations. Ultimately, these characterizations still treat Gyanumaya's series of actions as a singular sort of product, frozen as if in a piece of amber. Holland et al. seem content with holding the amber up to the light without providing thick description that might further account for the process that led to this product. Again, I think the value of improv theory rests on the utility and value of Holland et al.'s approach. Holland et al.'s work aims to contextualize identity and agency in particular ways that allow for more understanding of how people can continue to function in social scenes even when faced with potentially untenable circumstances. Having noticed that improvisations are the moments where individuals move forward through potentially constricted circumstance, I think the next step would be to further describe the improvised moments before, during, and after the highlighted improvisation that would open the possibility of cultivating meaning and understanding around the process that leads to the novel solutions humans are capable of producing.

Improv theory would begin with the dramatic framework described above (act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose). However, improv theory would then seek to thickly describe Gyanumaya's actions in terms of how those actions arise through listening, affirming, and playing. Improv theory offers the possibility of making meaning through observation of the way Gyanumaya, as lone performer, improvises her way to an interesting solution to her problem. Even when improvising alone, humans still manage

to account for the influences of their sociocultural ensemble. Understanding how Gyanumaya keeps herself in the scene where others might have just gone home necessitates a way of describing the process that led to the improvisation.

In this context, Gyanumaya is "listening" or attending to a variety of pressures that apply force to the improvisation she is about to enact. Her preconceived notions of self and identity imposed and fostered by the particular strictures of the caste system are examples of items that she is engaged in listening to or heeding. The degree to which she listens is more important than trying to decide whether or not she is listening. The binary choice does not serve to attend to the dynamic process that is her coming to the interview and climbing the wall. The various tenets of improv theory that might be considered principles about listening would help to further unpack the listening part of Gyanumaya's improvisational process.

Gyanumaya's actions suggest that there are multiple ideas and concepts that she chooses (consciously or unconsciously) to affirm. She improvises in a way that attends to the mandates that she not pollute the kitchen of a home owned by someone in a higher caste than her. She improvises in a way that accommodates whatever impulses she has that leads her to choosing to participate in the research interview. She appears to want to respect the caste system mandates while still participating in the invited interview. Improvisational theater would indicate that a character's actions affirm the various constraints and opportunities arising within an improvised theater scene. Gyanumaya performs, in this example, without other ensemble members present. Yet she affirms the values and ideas of ensemble members not present by

choosing to climb a wall. Her climb makes visible the various sociocultural values she, and her ensemble, take to be valuable.

Finally, the act of climbing the outer wall is an example of the ways improvisational theater would think about playing in the scene. There seems to be no way obvious way for Gyanumaya to affirm both her attention to the caste system while also participating in the research interview. Yet she chooses to climb the wall in a way that satisfies all of the constraints and and takes advantage of the opportunities presented to her character in this particular scene. Improvisational theater would value this novel solution to a complicated problem as a high quality example of playing through the various aspects of the scene. More important than improvisational theater's valuing of this play, improv theory uses improvisational theater concepts to observe the play and its workings in the first place.

This example provides a starting point for my vision of theory building that attends to improvisation as a verb in equal measure to thinking about improvisation, as Holland et al. do, as a noun. Burke's pentad (Burke, 1969) enables the start of observation and analysis to be static and honoring the improvised product of a certain scene. Instead of stopping where Holland et al. do, improv theory enables consideration of the improvised process that led to the improvised product. Improv theory allows me to observe and analyze Gyanumaya's scene as a process of equal importance to the same scene viewed as product. In order to get to Burke's dramatic approach, I now contextualize improv theory in the field of performance studies. This field further allows for the consideration of Holland et al.'s figured worlds as containing both processes and products, like Gyanumaya's, that are improvised.

Improvisation and Performance Studies

In an effort to further situate this work in the context of pre-existing scholarly conversations, I will momentarily pick up a conversation in the field of performance studies. While I do not intend to connect an improv theory of learning completely within that broad field, I do believe there are already scholars who bear mentioning for their thinking about the performative quality of teaching, learning, and literacy in ways that connect with the theory I want to use in order to observe and analyze improvisation. As with many ongoing conversations about teaching and learning, I find research that acknowledges improvisation as a quality of the activity being studied. However, this tacit acknowledgement tends to be the end of the conversation in terms of improvisation being a part of the detailed analysis of teaching, learning, and literacy.

Teachers have been likened to performance artists in a number of ways within the field of education research. Conversely, other writers have taken issue with the performance analogy (See Dawe, 1984 and R. Smith, 1979 for a sample of these points and counterpoints). Even when considering classroom activity as a form of drama, the focus of the debate tends to be on the ways the teacher is (or is not) a performer. The performative turn remains contentious, but the move still finds frequent use in ever more complicated research agendas. In a project concerned with performance and pedagogy, Denzin writes:

> I join four discourses, merging the performance turn in the human disciplines (Alexander, 2005; Conquergood, 1998), with theories of critical pedagogy (Giroux & Giroux, in press) and critical race theory (Darder & Torres, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005), connecting these formations to the call by

> indigenous scholars for a new ethics of inquiry (Smith, 2005), new pedagogies of hope, new models of democracy. (p. 326)

This quote suggests the complicated ways scholars from a number of fields have made the *performance turn* when thinking about some aspect of education. The scope of this initial improv theory development precludes a thorough integration of the ideas and theory properly into the field of performance studies. However, I aim to make practical use of the *performance turn* in an effort to further contextualize the ways I see improv theory as fitting more broadly into the sociological, anthropological framework of figured worlds. In particular, I will draw on Conquergood's four part breakdown of the anthropological performance turn. With Conquergood in place, I will postpone a more complete conversation of improv theory fully contextualized in the field of performances studies until a later iteration of this project in the same way Holland et al. use performative language and concepts without taking the time to fully render their work through the lens of performance studies.

Yet, to make the performance turn in this work, I offer the following considerations to highlight the ways improv theory borrows certain ideas within performance studies. Pineau (1994) takes up the back and forth debate about performance metaphors and their place in education research in order to reclaim certain useful ideas while discarding or extending other aspects of the earlier conversation. Acknowledging and refuting by turns, Pineau unpacks a framework from Conquergood (1989) in order to arrive at the contemporary utility of the performance turn. Pineau (1994) repurposes:

> The figure-ground shift from thinking about performance as a context specific event--a traditional theatrical experience--to understanding performance as an essential agent of human experience, enables the researcher to look through the products of human expression to the performance principles that undergird them. In effect, the heuristic value of the performance perspective lies precisely in the shift from product to process. (p. 9)

The product to process shift is important for improv theory in that a conceptual framework of improvisation allows for a more holistic analysis of the entire ensemble (teachers and students or anyone in the engaged in the activities we might label classroom practice). Further, improv theory enables this holistic view to account for multiple performers across the entire activity. Instead of understanding isolated agents in isolated moments, improv theory allows the researcher to be concerned with providing thick description of microscopic moments that contribute to a macroscopic understanding of learning. As Pineau suggests, I believe the performative turn allows my project to theorize about improvisation as a fundamental principle undergirding human interaction--including the interactions that happen in scenes of learning.

Conquergood discusses the performative turn in anthropology, and I take his four part account of this turn to be the most useful, and in this project, the primary way to situate improv theory in the context of performance studies. Conquergood (1989) poses an understanding of the ways anthropologists turn toward performances studies and begin to think about performing anthropology. He posits *poetics, play, process,* and *power* as “four keywords...significant terminals in this discursive network” (p. 82). Each of these terminals proves useful in the ways I am trying to further contextualize the development

of an improv theory of learning. Before returning to Holland et al.'s figured worlds, I position Conquergood's *poetics* as a way of understanding the scenes of learning that I take to be the locus of improv theory observation and analysis. This concept affords me the chance to define the ways I understand improvisation and scenes of learning in a more definitive, bounded way. The concept of *play* allows for a more thorough understanding of improvisation as a fundamental part of performed life experience. A further mention of Geertz situates and defines the way I see play connecting to improv theory. *Process* situates improv theory as a means of understanding the moment to moment experience of scenes of learning. The shift Conquergood helps me begin a longer argument justifying the development of improv theory in the first place. Finally, Conquergood's use of the term *power* affords me the opportunity to lay out my understanding of "urban education" and "critical literacy" as important elements related to the usage of improv theory.

The first of Conquergood's four-part framework, poetics, provides an ethnographic view of scenes of learning that accounts for the ways these scenes are sites for the production and practice of culture. In part, literacy serves as an example of cultural production and practice that gets played out in the context of improvised interactions as well as preconfigured scripts, routines, and rehearsals that might best be understood as guided by a particular poetics. Conquergood (1989) describes the poetics of ethnographic research:

> Performance-centered research features the fabricated, invented, imagined, constructed nature of human realities. Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; even, like fictions, they are "made up." Ethnographers are attracted to

> those cultural fabrications where ambiguity and artifice are most conspicuous...These heightened, reflexive genres reveal the possibilities and limits of everyday role-playing and invention. They remind us that cultures and persons are more than created; they are creative. They hold out the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world. (p. 83)

Education researchers interested in a contextualized understanding of literacy development must have a way of fully describing the scenes of learning where literacy creates and is created. A scene of learning can be understood to be composed of rules, routines, and habits that end up informed by a poetics particular to the given ensemble of people found in the scene. The ensemble then improvises their scene of literacy learning within the context of those poetics. Providing thick description of both the improvisation as well as the more fixed aspects of the scene of learning necessitates a theoretical framework that can describe both aspects distinctly as well as account for the way the poetics and the improvisation are interrelated.

An improv theory would more fully enable the thick description necessary for the performance-centered research Conquergood is writing about in relationship to the performative turn in his particular methodological field. Simultaneously, this understanding of poetics further supports the use of the figured worlds framework that also aims at thick description and understanding in an effort to pursue "the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world" (Conquergood, 1989, p. 83). Holland et al. suggest that the moments of improvisation, within the context of the poetics imposed on a given scene, are precisely those moments of innovation and invention where identity and agency can spontaneously evolve to meet a particular individual's or group's need. An

improv theory does not preclude the examination of more fixed elements within the scene (i.e. the poetics of the scene). Rather, an improv theory allows for the thick description of the way individuals and groups develop their scenes in the context of those poetics.

The improvised interactions of individuals and groups in the context of a particular poetics would be considered a form of play in an improv theory. Play serves as a central concept in improv theory, in part, because improvisation is a fundamental element of play. Incorporating play into the performative turn, Conquergood (1989) writes:

> This term is linked to improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning, and carnival. As soon as a world has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster's playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation. Appreciation of play has helped ethnographers of performance to understand the unmasking and unmaking tendencies that keep cultures open and in a continuous state of productive tension. The metacommunicative signal "this is play" temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction. (p. 83)

I take Conquergood's trickster to be a metaphorical stand-in for both teachers and students. More precisely, teachers and students, or any member of the learning ensemble, improvise in new ways the various literacies and identities that have been amassed up to the point of the particular scene of learning in question. Real learning takes place when scenes are "open and in a continuous state of productive tension." To understand the performances of the various ensemble members in a given scene of learning, the the trickster as improviser must be understood as a possibility for each participant in the scene. Furthermore, the "radical self-questioning critique" and subsequent possibility for transformation lives in the improviser in the scene of learning. The improvised character of play enables the possibility of novel paths to learning in both routine and novel scenes of learning. As long as play is present in the process of learning, there is improvisation. As long as there is improvisation in the scene, the trickster has the opportunity for "deconstruction and reconstruction."

I understand learning to be a form of play. That is, when scenes of learning no longer involve this sense of play, there is no longer learning in that scene. Scenes of learning can be analyzed through the performative turn when learning is considered play and play is recognized as improvisation. As Conquergood would acknowledge, this sense of play relies on Geertz's ethnographic formulation of deep play. Writing about Balinese cockfighting, Geertz examines the ways a particular socially and culturally situated activity can create and be created by other, at times seemingly unrelated, socially and culturally situated activity. The Balinese learn and reproduce social and cultural lessons through the activity of cockfighting. The sport symbolically allows the Balinese to express, be expressed, and engage in social and cultural literacy and identity

formation. As such, this sport or game takes on a meaning and meaning-making importance beyond what might normally go unnoticed or unanalyzed.

Deriving the concept from Jeremy Bentham, Geertz (1973) clarifies that the cockfight is "play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his [Bentham's] utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all...it is a symbol or moral import, perceived or imposed" (p. 432). In order to fully understand the scene of learning, the researcher must be able to recognize the seriousness with which all of the activity in the classroom may be taken in terms of how that activity may symbolize some process of enculturation. Learning is play, and play can be serious business in terms of what the activity of play might be doing to create in the player some social or cultural literacy, identity, or knowledge. The performative turn allows the researcher to see the scene of learning as dramatized meaning making of the most serious sort. Geertz (1973) further utilizes the sense of performance when unpacking how the sport of cockfighting takes on such seriousness, "The disquietfulness arises, 'somehow,' out of a conjunction of three attributes of the fight: its immediate dramatic shape; its metaphoric content; and its social context" (p. 444). At the end of this discussion of performance studies, I will opt for Burke's pentad, but Geertz has the same ideas in mind with regard to unpacking a game or a sport in a way that attends to the drama and performance of socially situated culture and identity. Improv theory allows the researcher the chance to provide the thick description of the improvisation of these moments as they are needed to attend to the ways the drama and performance within the scenes of learning contain the same "deep play" or socially situated development of culture and identity.

Returning to Conquergood for a moment, when I suggest that learning is play and that play is improvised, I am positing just how seriously we must take the improvised process by which participants in scenes of learning create and are created by the literacy and identity they bring individually and as a collective ensemble. Where Conquergood calls upon the archetype of the trickster, I wish to emphasize the quality of play that creates possibility. Learning can only happen in scenes that are open to possibility. There are no tricks. Rather, there are moments where scenes of learning lead students and teachers to new possibilities for what might be socially and culturally possible.

After adopting play as central to the performative turn, Conquergood emphasizes process. Conquergood (1989) explains:

> Commitment to process and the shift from product to productivity has had a corrosive effect on positivism. Instead of static structures and stables systems with variables that can be measured, manipulated, and managed, culture is transacted through performance. Culture becomes an active verb, not a noun...Instead of pinning down concepts, researchers attempt to listen over time to the unfolding voices, nuances, and intonations of performed meaning. This process-centered way of thinking and talking about culture alerts ethnographers to the irreducible and evanescent dynamics of social life--all the forces that resist closure. (p. 83)

Here again, I find Conquergood's quartet worth mentioning because these various qualifications of the performative turn align usefully with improv theory as a means of unpacking scenes of learning. The improvisational quality of learning cannot be

understood without thinking about the process of exchanging one offer after another throughout the course of a particular scene of learning. Improv theory provides a way to think about particular performances as they unfold over time.

Improv theory accounts for the dynamism of a process that gets lived out from one moment to the next. Improv theory also accounts nicely for the ways a particular scene may be opened through the continuation of play or closed down when play is absent. Without play as a part of the process, I would argue that learning stops. The presence or absence of improvisation as a part of a scene offers a starting point for considering whether or not play, and therefore learning, may be occurring. With that said, I do not wish to set up a binary where learning is happening or not or improvisation and play are present or not. Rather, I would agree with Conquergood's understanding of play and process as resisting the impulses toward closure. Specifically, learning and play and improvisation necessitate and perpetuate the opening of possibilities. Improvisation as part of the process provides a site for better understanding the ways scenes of learning facilitate the acquisition of literacy and identity that further resists closure. The development of resistance through improvisation, and the way improvisation in itself resists closure, provides a starting point for the ways improv theory also offers thick description of the way power operates in scenes of learning.

Even before considering Conquergood's own expression of power as it relates to the performative turn, I digress for just a moment to consider an example of how performance studies and education more generally would benefit from an improv theory that encourages thick description of the improvised relationships between the participants within scenes of learning. For example, in Sarason's (1999) *Teaching as a Performance*

Art, the performative turn allows for questions concerned with the ways power relates to various relationships within a classroom. Sarason (1999) asks, "How do we want students and teachers to know, understand, and regard each other? What allows each to be believable to the other?" (p. 44). Sarason asks these questions in the context of thinking about teaching through the works of Dewey. While not answered here (or anywhere in this dissertation), I believe this sort of question, and the questions asked by the likes of Dewey, require thick description of classroom practice that can account for the processes by which power gets played out in the relationships developed in scenes of learning. These questions are questions of power, and Conquergood ends his summation of the performative turn with thoughts about power.

Conquergood (1989) posits about power:

> This keyword invokes politics, history, ideology, domination, resistance, appropriation, struggle, conflict, accommodation, subversion, and contestation. Because it is public, performance is a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated. Ethnographers are now asking, How does performance reproduce, legitimate, uphold, or challenge, critique, and subvert ideology? And with the influence of processualism, they are more and more phrasing their questions so that they embrace a both/and complexity, instead of an either/or polarization; viz., How are performers situated between forces of accommodation and resistance? And how do they simultaneously reproduce and struggle against hegemony? What are the performative resources for interrupting master scripts?...the conduct of ethnographic research is absolutely embedded in issues of

> power and authority. The practice of fieldwork mediates a set of power relations that determines who is observing whom. (p. 84)

As above, I include all of these questions not as examples of questions to be answered in this dissertation. This dissertation represents the first step in developing an improv theory that would contribute to the answering of such questions with the added ability of understanding how the performance Conquergood describes here is improvised. The ability of both teachers and students to struggle against closure relies on their ability to improvise. Improv theory offers a chance for thick description that could account for the ways power and authority creates and is created through the ebb and flow of power dynamics within a given scene of learning. This same ebb and flow is wrapped up in the improvisation of students and teachers improvising the various literacies and identities they utilize in scenes of learning. This final point of description for the performative turn points to the ways an improv theory has important implications for how scenes of learning and the development of critical literacy could be analyzed by researchers with an eye toward understanding how these literacies and identities unfold in the improvised performance of classroom practice.

I have attempted to do a number of things in the preceding passages. First, I contextualized improv theory in the field of performance studies. This context affords me the chance to establish some connective tissue between the various definitions and frameworks I believe I need in order to develop an improv theory. I will finish this section of definition and framework establishment by introducing the ways I understand Kenneth Burke's Five Key Terms of Dramatism. With this final bit of framework (at least in this chapter) in place, I will conclude this chapter by returning to a discussion of

improvisation in figured worlds and a brief précis regarding the study of improvisation in education research.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Kenneth Burke (1969) offers "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism." Burke (1969) begins with the question, "What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?" (p. xv). The overarching aim of Burke's book is to offer a means of answering that question in a variety of ways. I find Burke's dramatic turn to be in the same spirit as the performative turn discussed above. In part, *A Grammar of Motives* offers a way to unpack scenes (to keep using the dramatic, performative term). "The Five Key Terms of Dramatism" serve as an overarching set of terms that scaffold the various scenes that Burke (and those utilizing Burke) believes there to be benefit in reading.

I adopt these five terms as a way to start the process of thick description in the context of using improv theory that pays particular attention to the dramatic or performative qualities of learning. Giving consideration to these five terms, as seen with Gyanumaya above, sets the analytical stage in a way that initiates the thick description possible with improv theory. Burke uses these terms as a starting point for contextualizing his analysis of situated motives, but I believe these same terms serve equally well to contextualize the improvised quality of particular scenes. This shared productivity comes as no surprise given the dramatic, performative tact of both Burke's analysis of motives and improv theory.

Although used for different purposes, I take Burke's set up of these terms without much modification. Burke (1969) introduces the terms (I substitute improvisation where Burke uses motives):

> In a rounded statement about [improvisation], you must have some word that names the *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*. (p. xv)

The utility of these five terms lies in their generality and broad meaning. Broad and general, these terms and their definitions provide a flexible sort of starting point for characterizing and observing particular scenes. These terms invite an analysis of improvisation that could start simply and progress toward great complication in order to meet the need of particularly complicated instances of improvisation (Gyanumaya's improvisation for example).

Burke attaches a simple set of questions to these terms that also serve as a flexible starting point for thinking about what one might do when first setting about to observe, thickly describe, and analyze improvisation. He (1969) proposes, "Any complete statement about [improvisation] will offer *some kind* of answers to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he did it (agency), and why (purpose)" (p. xv). These questions guided my initial repackaging of Holland et al.'s data regarding Gyanumaya. Answers to these questions prove to be fruitful context for thinking more specifically about the improvisation that is inherent in all of the experiences that include these five elements. With a number of definitions and frames in place, I leave the theory-building introduction for the rest of the chapter in order to return to figured worlds as a concept as well as introducing the figured world of improvisation studies in education research.

The offers at the beginning of this chapter start a scene with the particular figured world of the reader. These offers arose from a particular figured world of the writer. Without occupying the same space-time, we, the reader and writer, are creating new knowledge as we read and write our way through the figured worlds where this text exists. The scene we create through this text and its opening offers depends on the identities we bring to the reading and writing. Those identities arise from the various literacies we have acquired and inhabit as we read and write. Ultimately, we are improvising this process of engaging literacies in order to establish identity such that we can create a scene of knowledge-making using this text. Where Holland et al. would acknowledge the improvised quality of the process, I want to observe and analyze that quality such that all performers in the scene can reflect on and adjust their improvisation based on the reflection made possible by thick description arising from improv theory. A theory of improvisation in scenes of teaching and learning could provide the observational and analytical tools necessary for unpacking the complicated improvised qualities of scenes of literacy learning where teachers and students navigate and negotiate literacy and identity in an effort to share scenes of meaning creation.

Holland et al.'s concept of figured worlds provides the socioculturally informed framework necessary for first understanding that improvisation always occurs in the moments where individuals create their identities in social contexts. As Holland et al.'s work suggests, I believe an improvisation is the moment where new possibilities open and unfold through the development and exchange of culture through social living. I am proposing there is a way forward in terms of analyzing that improvisation as a series of moments that add up to scenes and position improvisation as a fundamental quality of the

development of literacy and identity. I propose that improvisational theater arts provide the foundation for developing a theory of improvisation in scenes of teaching and learning whereby educators and education researchers would have the tools necessary to reflect on and enhance the individual and collective improvisation that happens in all scenes of education. The remainder of this chapter will be taken up with examples of research that has aimed at using concepts of improvisation to better understand figured worlds where the performers in the scene have some vested interest in a positive outcome for the scene.

The Problems with Improvisation in Education Research

The final moves of this chapter will situate improv theory more overtly in contemporary research agendas. Before moving to a more formal review of literature, there remain a few questions and ideas that hint at the purpose and significance of the theory development I am undertaking. This conclusion takes a break from the work of defining terms and setting parameters. Rather, this section examines a few examples of places where improv theory (with defined terms and set parameters) might prove useful.

First, across the spectrum of education research, a number of studies have been conducted in an effort to better understand how to get groups, in general, to be more collaborative and innovative. To that end, other research has considered the use of improvisational theater arts as a way into the complicated social mechanisms arising in various figured worlds. For instance, examining a business school classroom, Aylesworth (2008) writes:

> Improvisational comedy emphasizes collaboration over competition. This leads to creative ideas and solutions to problems. By establishing this "improv mind-

> set" in the business classroom, an instructor may be able to overcome some of the problems associated with the case method (e.g., shy students, dominating students). By doing so, the learning environment of the classroom may be enhanced, and case discussions and learning outcomes may be improved. (p. 106)

This type of research and writing (see also Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001; Hough, 2011) indicates the ways contemporary companies and businesses across a number of fields aim to find ways to help their teams produce more creative and innovative products and solutions by adopting an "improv mind-set." Figured worlds, like business school classrooms, have been recognized as places where improvisation occurs. However, this example, like many others, sees utility in transplanting concepts and exercises from improvisational theater arts. This transplant occurs without theorizing about the improvisation itself. As a quality in a business school classroom, improvisation never receives the theoretical attention it might need in order to more precisely suggest what about improvisational theater proves applicable in this situated scene of learning.

I would posit that an improv theory of learning would provide a qualitative thick description method in order to observe and analyze business school classroom practice such that observations could be made beyond "may be enhanced." An improv theory of learning would provide researchers with a theoretical framework capable of outlining when and how particular moves get made by teachers and students. Analyzing these moves as an improviser or improv director might offer the same kind of reflective opportunity that improv ensembles rely on to improve their craft. The figured world of improv theater offers the starting point for this theory as well as the example habit of

reflecting on a quality of their practice in order to be able to make decisions about changing that practice in an effort to achieve specific outcomes.

Whatever the particular figured world, greater emphasis is being placed on finding ways to improve the creative, innovative, and collaborative capacities of various groups or ensembles. In turn, from early childhood development to professional school, educators and administrators have responded by packaging lists and curricula around 21st Century Skills (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.). If business classrooms want these traits, then creativity, innovation, and collaboration can be profitable. This over-simplified formulation has led improvisation to become more prevalent as a topic of research within the field of education. Yet, few have offered a cohesive vision for how the work of improvisational theater could be used as theoretical lens instead of just exercises that, for the most part inexplicably, help a group to be more creative, innovative, and collaborative.

In response to the motivations just mentioned, a growing body of research exists centered around the fundamental questions to be answered for pre K-16 education in terms of developing an educated workforce capable of creativity, innovation, and collaboration. Psychologist R. Keith Sawyer provides another starting point for better understanding the role improvisation studies might play in the development of research and inquiry geared toward providing educators and education researchers with more substantive tools for examining elusive subjects like creativity, innovation, and collaboration. In an article from 2011, titled “A call to action: The challenges of creative teaching and learning,” Sawyer succinctly summarizes past calls for teaching creativity in schools from the last 150 years. This summary illustrates the ways the 21st Century

Skills movement does not represent a particularly novel suggestion. More importantly, Sawyer continues by positing how technological innovation and globalization have rapidly increased the need for creative thinkers. Sawyer (2011a) concludes his opening précis: "In the United States and in other industrialized countries, there is a broad consensus: we need more creative graduates--for the economy, for a functioning democracy, and for human fulfilment" (p. 2). Given this consensus, Sawyer spends the rest of his article indicating the opportunities and challenges of developing creative teaching and learning.

Specifically, Sawyer (2011a) writes about a paradox he sees for teachers attempting to improvise within structured lesson plans, "Teacher expertise must weave together a large knowledge base of plans, routines, and structures, within improvised classroom practice that responds to the unique needs of the moment" (p. 11). This paradox introduces the ways improvisation has been seen by researchers in the last few decades. Educators and education researchers must simultaneously consider the scripted, rehearsed elements of classroom practice while allowing for the improvised realization of those elements. This research has acknowledged the presence and the importance of improvisation. Work remains to be done in terms of better understanding moments of improvisation in scenes of literacy learning while being able to take this newfound understanding and develop more sensitive theoretical frames to guide the investigation of these improvised moments. Again, Sawyer, like Holland et al., acknowledges improvisation as a quality of the phenomenon, but neither Sawyer nor Holland et al. has conceptualized the means of observing and analyzing the moments of improvisation themselves such that we might help the participants in a particular figured world, like

teachers and students in scenes of literacy learning, become more capable of exploring various literacies and identities in an effort to be more efficacious in that particular figured world.

Sawyer's (2011a) article outlines several worthwhile questions about creativity and improvisation in the context of teaching. These questions begin to outline the ways the figured world of teaching involves improvisation both as Holland et al. would define it as well as the more particular way I have begun to define improvisation in this chapter. Again, these questions necessitate a sophisticated theory and methodology in order to be productively pursued. While not answered in this dissertation, I believe these are the sorts of questions that could be answered with research that utilized a version of the improv theory proposed in these chapters. Sawyer (2011a) asks:

- What is the right degree of scaffolds, that result in the most effective creative learning?
- What lesson plans and curricula will guide learners in the most optimal way, while allowing space for creative improvisation?
- What is the optimal balance between scripts, routines, and activities on the one hand, and creative improvisation on the other?
- What is the best way to educate preservice teachers to prepare them to optimally negotiate the teaching paradox? (p. 15)

These questions all aim to make the development of creativity, innovation, and collaboration a less elusive process for teachers and students. Improvisation remains central to investigating each of these questions, and improvisation is central to the difficulty of conducting these investigations. In addition to improvisation serving as a

primary object of scrutiny, Sawyer's research also begins to illustrate the ways improvisation might serve as a theoretical framework for the research he proposes. However, I find Sawyer limited in some of the same ways as Holland et al. These questions do not take into consideration the ways improvisation necessitates a moment-by-moment analysis in order to make the improvisational quality of the scene or figured world visible and available for reflection.

There are a number of researchers trending along the same lines as Sawyer, and even more researchers who are following Sawyer's lead in terms of recognizing the importance of improvisation as a facet of teaching and learning (Bake-Sennett & Matusov, 1997; Berk & Trieber, 2009; Erickson, 1982; Harlow, 2009; Holmes & Qureshi, 2006; Huffaker & West, 2005; Lane, 2011; Martin, Towers, & Pirie, 2006; Murphy & Hajnal, 2009; Smith & McKnight, 2009; Stanton & Gonzalez, 2011). An examination of these additional works in the next chapter will further illustrate the ways few examples in improv studies in education research do more than acknowledge the improvisational quality of the particular figured world they investigate. Many of these studies even consider transposing work from the field of improvisational theater arts, but those efforts remain incomplete given the lack of observation and analysis that cultivates an understanding of the improvised moments throughout a particular scene that would enable a more complete reading of the literacy and identity being created.

Researchers interested in directly using improvisational theater to study improvisation are more rare. Carrie Lobman (2006) has made substantive progress in terms of synthesizing a theoretical framework that calls upon improvisational theater as a means for examining improvised activity. Lobman examines improvisation as an

analytical tool in early childhood classrooms. Her work falls in line with other early childhood research that examines play. As discussed above, play provides another avenue into improvisation, but this avenue has been as incompletely followed as the other paths mentioned. At the end of an article from 2006, Lobman points toward future research concluding:

> In order to provide the field with a richer, more nuanced picture of interactions between teachers and children, we need to develop tools for examining the interactions continuously and holistically. Improv provides one such tool with a particular focus on collaboration and relational activity...The findings from this study demonstrate the potential of an improv lens for developing and deepening our understandings of early childhood teaching. (p. 468)

I am interested in cultivating and synthesizing a theory of improvisation that would help to observe and analyze the relational activity of teaching and learning that Lobman describes. Lobman's interest in examining interactions within the figured world of the classroom "continuously and holistically" leans toward the kind of thick description qualitative analysis I am proposing. In order to unpack the figured world of a classroom, the improvised actions of students and teachers needs to be noticed, coded, and analyzed with a theory of improvisation in scenes of teaching and learning. Such a process would enable a researcher to highlight particular moments as improvised with different choices from one moment to the next that would make a more robust reflective process possible. Holland et al. recognize the overarching ways identity and agency arise through improvised interactions within various figured worlds. Lobman acknowledges the possibility of an improv theory that would take the moments of improvisation themselves

as objects of scrutiny. My work centers on more fully realizing Lobman's improv theory as a means of articulating how the improvised moments within Holland et al.'s figured worlds add up to an overarching improvisational development of literacy and identity through social interaction within a classroom.

With a closer analysis of scenes of literacy learning and an eye toward understanding how they are improvised, a researcher could make considerable headway in thinking about how awareness of and facility within the improvised moments dictates the degree and kind of literacy and identity that can be achieved in a given class. The patterns of scenes that get played out repeatedly need to be unpacked with an improv theory that would account for some of the fine grained details of language that provide information about how different participants within the scene are collaborating and improvising with one another. Lobman's research suggests there is great promise in a more fully realized improv theory. Holland et al. offer an overarching framework of identity development that already acknowledges improvisation as a quality of socially situated development. Between these two points, there must be a way of understanding classroom practice such that teachers and students could be helped to reflect and, thereby, have more constructive scenes that build the literacy and identity desired by the entire ensemble.

In an effort to accomplish that goal, I have attempted to bring together disparate bodies of research that observe and analyze the improvised qualities of human interaction generally while also considering the ways improvisers improvise. In particular, I aim to contribute to research geared specifically for understanding how teachers and students improvise and how the literacy and identity developed within these groups is negotiated

within a particular figured world and through an improvised process. Sawyer's research provides a starting point for research that looks at the improvisational nature of conversation in everyday human behavior. This research establishes these interactions as improvised and compliments the acknowledgement in Holland et al. With these more traditional research fields in place, improvisational theater as an artistic field offers another set of texts worth positioning. This set of texts proves lacking to the same degree as the research critiqued above. Like the research just critiqued, the work of improvisers offers resources for developing an improv theory without actually taking steps toward that development.

Improvisers (actors and directors) have been writing about improvisation as a theatrical art form for some time (Chin, 2009; Gwinn, 2007; Halpern, 1994, 2005; Hauk, 2012; Johnstone, 1992, 1999; Peters, 2009; Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008; Spolin, 1986, 1999; Tavares, 2012). Their work falls outside the usual tracks of education research, but these texts provide critical insight into the ways improvisation can be made visible and reflected. With greater visibility and reflection, new approaches could be taken toward thinking about the ways the development of literacy and identity play out in scenes of literacy learning. I hope to transpose these works for use as an improv theory in the context of education research. This transposition would extend most directly the work of Carrie Lobman. Lobman's work is some of the first to use terms like "improv theory" and "improv analysis." As such, there is work to be done in building a framework for theory and analysis that would enable a new kind of research into the ways teachers and students improvise literacy and identity within the figured world of their scenes of literacy learning.

Improvisational Challenges and Opportunities

With an initial placement of figured worlds, performance, and improvisation studies, a constellation of problems becomes apparent surrounding the study of improvisation as part of figured worlds and within improv studies in education. The first problem to be addressed is an epistemological concern. Improvisation, as a phenomenon or quality of a phenomenon, tends to be rather difficult to observe, analyze, and discuss. This quality is invisible, and participants tend to be unaware of this quality. Providing thick description of this quality requires an improv theory, and an improv theory necessitates the further development of ideas present across the work considered here. Another moment from Holland et al. offers another justification for studying improvisation. This same passage also highlights the need for a theoretical framework for studying the improvisation itself. Holland et al. (2003) write:

> Improvisations command our attention because they may be excluded only at the risk of missing the back-and-forth of engagement. Even within grossly asymmetrical power relations, the powerful participants rarely control the weaker so completely that the latter's ability to improvise resistance becomes irrelevant. (p. 277)

I agree with Holland et al.'s call for attention to be paid to the "back-and-forth" moments that get improvised in all figured worlds. An improv theory would allow for discreet analysis of those back-and-forth moments in terms that thickly describe the improvisation itself. As Holland et al. insinuate, improvisation often gets ignored or misunderstood. This idea holds true in the field of education research. That is, rarely do teachers or students in a scene of learning reflect on the improvisational quality of their

interactions or their learning. Observing and understanding improvisation as an element of the "back-and-forth" that makes up figured worlds is a problem from the start. Students, teachers, and education researchers need a way to become more conscious of and reflective about the improvisational aspects of teaching and learning.

I posit that greater consciousness of improvisation as a quality of teaching and learning would enable a more sophisticated understanding of the complicated ways students and teachers engage in negotiated improvisation to develop literacy and identity. Holland et al. offer a pre-existing framework for thinking about this negotiation as an aspect of figured worlds. However, the framework pays only cursory attention to the ways those particular negotiations are improvised. The concept of figured worlds offers another problem and opportunity for making use of improv theory and analysis to better understand literacy and identity in scenes of literacy learning. The problem of analyzing the improvisation itself remains even with the help of figured worlds to make the improvisation manifest enough for observation and analysis. Oddly enough, in spite of the difficulty surrounding improvisation, there exists a group of thinkers and artists dedicated to more conscious and reflective improvisation. Improvisers provide a possible solution to the initial epistemological trouble as well as a way forward in further scrutinizing the figured worlds where literacy and identity are formed.

Improvisers are those individuals who treat the phenomenon or quality of improvisation as an art form. Improvisational theater arts consider improvisation to be both an actor's tool as well as a performance art in itself. Leep (2008) sets the following parameters to establish what counts as theatrical improvisation groups:

> Improvisational groups...1) use improvisational forms as performance, 2) are performed primarily by actors with input from the audience primarily coming in the forms of suggestions rather than actions, and 3) are performed by groups whose primary goal it is to entertain and engage the audience through humorous or thought-provoking entertainment. (p. 2)

In their endeavor to be successful at theatrical improvisation, improvisers not only reflect on the fact of their improvisation, but they (as a community of artists) have developed a shared ethnotheory (Sawyer, 1997a) of improvisation that enables this reflection to be another shared, collaborative, ensemble activity. Improvisers in a theater make it their business to be conscious of their improvisation in an effort to become better at improvising. For better or worse, there is little research that proposes the ways teachers, students, and education researchers could make use of the improviser's reflective practice and collective ethnotheory. Occasionally, research points toward the ways improvisers can help teachers and students by teaching them to improvise through the same sorts of games and exercises found in improvisational theater curriculum (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; McKnight & Scruggs, 2008; Sawyer, 2011b; Spolin, 1986). However, the opportunity remains for a more fully realized improv theory to offer education researchers and educators a way of becoming more conscious of and reflective about the improvising they do every day in the figured world of their classrooms.

Based on my own experience as an improviser, student, educator, and education researcher, I believe developing teachers and students as improvising professionals and improvising ensembles is an excellent idea but not the focus of this dissertation. However, the problem remains to be solved with respect to how the

improvisers tool kit might become the education researchers tool kit such that the researcher could analyze classroom practice and scenes of literacy learning in ways that make visible the improvisation and enable reflection by deploying a version of the improviser's ethnotheory. All of the research so far cited could contribute to such an effort if it were to be synthesized within a more fully-formed theory of improvisation in scenes of teaching and learning. This dissertation provides said synthesis. As Holland et al. conceive of improvisation as *an* improvisation, I aim to improvise that synthesis using the research already mentioned to foreground my own study of improvisation in scenes of literacy learning.

I take the offers of other researchers as impetus and inspiration for this improvised synthesis, and I believe these are strong offers that should lead to promising scenes of research. Lobman seems to be somewhat alone in her use of and call for terms like "improv theory" and "improv analysis," but other researchers have asked questions that arch toward similar ends. DeZutter (2011) offers a number of insightful questions about the ways an improv theory might have implications for teacher education:

- Should teachers improvise?
- In what ways is teaching improvisational?
- How much control do [student-teachers] believe a teacher should have over the flow of a lesson and why?
- Do [student-teachers] expect effective teachers to engage in more or less improvisation than less effective teachers?
- How are [student-teachers] understanding the collaborative relationship between teacher and student? (p. 43)

These questions, while not directly answered here, provide still more examples of important research queries that would be aided by the synthesized improv theory I am proposing. Improvisation studies in the field of education have become more and more interested in questions like these as more and more constituents recognize the improvisational qualities of teaching and learning. Answering questions like these would help educators and education researchers develop a greater sense of how learning occurs within the context of figured worlds.

In addition to advocating for improvisation as an important quality of teaching, DeZutter (2011) makes a case for the role improvisation could play in teacher education programs. Further, DeZutter argues for the importance of acknowledging teaching as professional improvisation due to the fact that teaching in the 21st century will continue to demand even greater levels of improvisational ability from teachers. DeZutter also makes valuable points about the ways improvisation can be made invisible to teachers, students, and researchers. In order to accomplish these goals and answer these questions, DeZutter (2011) requests, “We need a...body of knowledge in the teaching profession, including a well-elaborated vision of good improvisational teaching, a shared vocabulary, learning goals for new teachers, and accompanying techniques for developing improvisational ability” (p. 35). I hope this dissertation offers first steps toward the body of knowledge DeZutter requests. DeZutter provides just one more example of an education researcher in need of the fully articulated “improv theory” and “improv analysis” hinted at by Lobman.

The need described by DeZutter offers a final specific example of the ways education researchers would benefit from a fully-formed improv theory and mode of

analysis. There are problems both in developing and deploying this theory and mode. The first problem arises from the difficult nature of studying improvisation. This difficulty needs to be addressed in part because improvisation is a fundamental quality of scenes of literacy learning. More specifically, scenes of literacy learning involve the formation of literacy and identity. In order to empower students and teachers to succeed in the 21st century, we need a better understanding of the ways these interrelated concepts develop through an improvised process. The methodological problem will be addressed with an improv theory of teaching and learning. With progress having been on the methodological problem, improv theory offers a unique tool for continuing to examine the improvisational quality of figured worlds wherein literacy and identity are formed.

In this dissertation, I offer a distillation and translation of the improviser's skill set and theory for education researchers like those just mentioned. More specifically, I provide a fine grain of analysis for those education researchers interested in thinking about the ways literacy learning and identity formation are improvised, ensemble occurrences within socially situated figured worlds. Ultimately, through this analysis, I articulate a theory of improvisation in scenes of literacy learning to be used in conjunction with the idea of figured worlds in an effort to better apprehend the complex development and negotiations of literacy and identity in scenes of literacy learning. A continued critical review of literature from numerous fields will lead to a synthesis of ideas and the articulation just promised. With synthesized theory in mind, I spend time and space analyzing scenes of literacy learning to offer one way to make use of this newly carved theoretical lens.

Lobman (2006) has referred to such a theoretical lens as “improv theory.” Her research has hinted at the ways this theory might be useful to understanding the improvised qualities of classroom practice. This dissertation supplements previous research like Lobman’s by continuing the work of developing an improv theory based on the previous research as well as a rereading of improvisational theater curriculum, research, and writing. This previous research and rereading are couched in an autoethnographic approach that accounts for my personal experience and expertise as improviser in a number of different parts of my life. Freshly hewn autoethnographic improv theory in hand, I deploy the theory in examples to further articulate the theory as well as illustrate the potential utility of having a way to examine the improvised moments of literacy and identity formation in scenes of literacy learning. I include observation and analysis of classroom practices in order to better understand how these practices are improvised. Ultimately, I hope to perpetuate work on improv theory and provide a substantive enough example to warrant further investigation of the ways education research might be impacted by a means of observing and analyzing the improvisational facets of literacy learning.

In order to deal with these facets, DeZutter (2011) highlights the ways in which teachers will need to be better improvisers in order to meet the evolving demands of learning in the 21st century. The purpose of this dissertation is to develop and express an improv theory that enables greater sophistication of analysis when observing improvisation in scenes of literacy learning. Teacher educators and education researchers could better pursue DeZutter’s agenda if they had a more fully-formed improv theory to use in thinking about their work. In this dissertation, I work to articulate a theory of

improvisation in scenes of teaching and learning that provides another way for teachers, teacher-educators, and education researchers to think about the improvised quality of scenes of literacy learning as well as the role literacy and identity play in those scenes. The application of the theory will provide an example of how improvisation can serve as both the researched phenomenon as well as the tool of research. Further, this theoretical framework would allow teacher educators to provide teachers with an awareness of themselves and their students as improvisers. The articulation and application of this theory will be aimed at answering the following research questions:

- How do teachers and students improvise literacy and identity in scenes of literacy learning?
- What can I understand about literacy and identity by observing and analyzing the improvised qualities inherent in scenes of literacy learning?

The progression of these questions addresses many of the problems described above. However, more importantly, these questions aim to make a contribution to a new method being used to better serve teachers and students in urban education as they navigate what school and learning will be in the 21st century.

The end of this chapter has sought to highlight research and questions that suggest the ways the work of this dissertation will be significant and situated in a number of pre-existing fields of study. The questions and examples compliment the start of the chapter as the most contemporary avenues for pursuing concerns about improvisation in education research. The next chapter provides a particular, critical review of the literature from a number of fields that proves to be directly pertinent to continue the theory-building started in the earlier moves of this chapter. This chapter has made some

offers and initiated a scene of theory-building and research. The following chapter continues that scene by adding even more characters and offers.

CHAPTER 3: NOTES ON THE SCENE

"To improvise is to expand and heighten the discoveries in the moment" (Libera, 2004, p. 23).

Introduction

Typically, an ensemble of improvisers will meet with their director after a show to get notes. A figured world in itself, the "post-show debrief" usually involves the director highlighting various scenes from the performance in order to help the improvisers better understand where and how their improvisation was thriving or lacking. At times, conversation will ensue to better understand these moments and notes. At other times, arguments and fights break out where improvisers will defend their choices and positions with great vigor. This process of receiving notes on the scenes serves to further enculturate members of the ensemble by helping them to understand what moves and values will be most important to the particular ensemble's performance. In this chapter, I see myself as both improviser and director. As an improvising scholar, I am taking notes from previous research and writing in an effort to find guidance for the research scene I am trying to create. As a director of this research scene, I am critiquing that same research and writing in order to highlight those moves and values I deem to be most important for the success of my research. In both cases, I take the research and writing process to be improvised activities where I continue to hope I am creating a scene of understanding with the reader.

The purpose of this study is to begin developing an improv theory of learning, based on improvisational theater principles, for observing, thickly describing, and analyzing the ways relational activity, such as classroom practice, gives rise to the formation of literacy and identity in scenes of literacy learning. This lens will be carved from some pre-existing work in the field of improvisational theater as well as improvisation studies in education. Ultimately, the field of literacy studies, in the conceptual context of figured worlds, needs to be considered given the particular phenomenon I hope to better observe and analyze with the improv theory lens. As such, this chapter will address research under three main headings. First, Holland et al.'s concept of figured worlds will be critiqued in terms of teaching and learning and then literacy and identity. Next, research from the field of improvisation studies in education will see some application of improv theater texts. Finally, the texts of improvisational theater, used by actors and directors pursuing the art form, will be reviewed and used to describe the figured world of improvisational theater. This chapter will seek to coalesce these disparate bodies of writing into a coherent conversation about the importance of the improvisation that takes place in scenes of literacy learning as teachers and students negotiate the formation of literacy and identity.

The Figured World of "Improvisation and the Art of Learning"

During my time as a doctoral student, I have presented the ideas of improvisational theater to teachers and teacher-educators at local, state, and regional conferences. "Improvisation and the Art of Learning" has served as the grandiose title for a dozen or so of my conference presentations and workshops over the past few years. In most of these presentations, I offer some version of the following description of

the relationship between improvisation, literacy, and identity. Improvisation happens all the time, every day. Our various literacies, as we acquire and apply them, are improvised. Like most improvisation in scenes of literacy learning, the ways we improvise emerging and developing literacies tends to be obscured. However, specific literacies are enacted through improvised moments of our scenes from one moment to the next based on our familiarity and facility with the given literacies available to us in those moments. These different literacies enable the various stories we are able to tell about ourselves. We tell these stories to our self about our self in much the same way we tell these stories to those around us. The stories we tell about our self to our self and the world around us make up our identity.

During my presentation of "Improvisation and the Art of Learning," I deploy a variety of my literacies as a presenter, researcher, and educator. I consciously and unconsciously developed these literacies by being a part of the audience for the presentations of others involved in utilizing the same kind of literacy. The audience members of this type of presentation are also engaged in enacting the literacy set of an audience member. Knowing how to "read" and "write" myself into the scene of a conference presentation as a presenter or audience member calls on a number of literacies. Using these literacies, I can tell a story about myself or represent myself to myself and others as a presenter or audience member. I take on the identity of presenter or audience member through the different stories I adopt to understand myself in relation to the figured world of "conference presentation" through the various literacies that exist in that world. As mentioned, I will use this chapter to further illustrate the ways improvisation, literacy, and identity are interconnected in various figured worlds. In

particular, I will begin to situate the focus of this investigation and synthesis such that scenes of literacy learning will be the principal figured world.

Figured Worlds

As discussed in the previous chapter, Holland et al. (2003) understand that the formation of identity and agency through various literacies occurs within a process that is improvised. At the conclusion of Chapter 1, Holland et al. write, “Improvisation can become the basis for a reformed subjectivity” (p. 18). The reformation of subjectivity arises from the improvisation that occurs when socially situated individuals use their various literacies to tell particular stories about themselves to themselves and the world in an effort to gain agency in that world. Holland et al. make no claims about these improvisations other than that they exist and offer opportunities for self-authoring; more precisely, Holland et al. never make a value judgment about the success or failure of a particular individual trying to improvise their way through a particular figured world. Holland et al. have no foundation for making the value judgment, or, at the least, they do not have an interest in making that judgment. They are observing the ways figured worlds are negotiated through an improvised process leading to improvised products existing between socially situated individuals.

I would argue that improvisational theater makes judgments all the time about the relative levels of success in various improvised scenes on the stage. Moreover, making these judgments is fundamental to the process of increasing the quality of the improvised art itself. Improvisers must know they are improvising, but they must also have a way of determining whether or not the improvisation they are doing is productive within the set of values held by a particular audience or a particular group of improvisers. Holland et

al. might not be interested in a particular set of values. Quite the contrary, they might suggest that any set of values arises within a particular figured world, which makes value judgments difficult from the start.

I would agree. However, the figured worlds where scenes of literacy learning happen necessitate a particular type of scene in order to enable learning. The type of scene that enables learning might vary from one figured world to another. However, a scene of learning is, by definition, a scene where individuals are in a position to do some learning and take advantage of that position. The degree to which the scene of learning is successful can be observed and analyzed using the shared terms and values found in improvisational theater arts. Ultimately, I do not view my position as a critique of Holland et al. Rather, I see myself extending their vision of improvisation in figured worlds. If figured worlds are created through an improvisational process and serve as sites of socially situated improvisations between individuals, then perhaps improvisational theater arts could provide a means of reflecting on the improvised quality of that process in such a way that the reflection allows for critique which leads to greater choice and control of the improvisation within a particular figured world. The "reformed subjectivity" could be observed and analyzed as more or less successful within a particular scene of learning depending on the values of the observer and participants.

Holland et al. (2003) further define figured worlds as "peopled by figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it" (p. 51). Indeed, improvisational theater would say the same about scenes produced on a stage. An improviser's ability to be cognizant of and internalize these ideas determines the degree

to which that improviser will be able to successfully participate in that scene. The carrying out of tasks within figured worlds can be understood through the same conceptual framework that improvisers use to better understand how effective they are in carrying out tasks within a particular scene through a particular character. Teachers and students inhabit the figured world within their classroom in a process that involves carrying out all sorts of tasks. Improvisation occurs when literacies and identities are adopted by teachers and students in order to accomplish certain tasks. An improvisational theater approach to understanding the figured worlds of classroom practice would enable a researcher to observe and analyze the ways and the degree to which teachers and students manage their tasks by more or less successfully employing the various literacies and identities available in a particular figured world or classroom.

Figured Worlds of Teaching and Learning

Now, I offer an example of education research that makes use of the figured worlds conceptual framework in an effort to better understand the literacy and identity of particular students in particular situations. This example utilizes the framework and its understanding of improvisation. Like Holland et al., Luttrell and Parker (2001) recognize the ways literacy and identity develop through an improvised process that takes place in particular figured worlds. Further, Luttrell and Parker keep their understanding of improvisation situated as an underlying quality helpful at the macroscopic level for looking at the ways particular literacies and identities develop over substantial periods of time. Once again, I would suggest the quality of improvisation could be examined at the microscopic level where the individual moments of improvisation reveal the process of literacy and identity formation.

The interpretation of figured worlds cultivated by Luttrell and Parker offers a common understanding of the identity work of Holland et al. Luttrell and Parker (2001) write:

> Synthesizing theoretical contributions made by Vygotsky, Bakhtin and Bourdieu and drawing upon examples from cross-cultural fieldwork, Dorothy Holland and her co-authors offer an account of identity in practice. Their theory of identity formation emphasises the dialogic relationship between institutional addresses...how one answers to these varied addresses. For Holland et al, this dialogue and the identities that result are not predetermined by structural impositions; rather, people find ways to improvise. When applied to understanding teenage literacy practice, this means considering how students improvise and author their worlds - how they cope with the ever present, demanding task of answering to others and to their changing environment, how old answers about who one is can become undone and can be replaced by new answers. (p. 238-239)

Initially, my own understanding and use of Holland et al. matches up with the vantage point offered here by Luttrell and Parker. The quoted article illustrates the various pressures and people that impact the development of identity in students. Through interviews and class observations Luttrell and Parker provide thick description of the figured worlds of literacy as well as description of the shifts students make between their various figured worlds. However, the article never suggests how these shifts and developments take place at the level of the moment. The purpose of their study seems to insist on gathering data in an effort to provide a big picture of the ways figured worlds

provide a conceptual framework for how students understand and use their literacies. An understanding of improvisational theater would allow for data to be gathered and analyzed regarding the smaller moments that make up the bigger picture. Luttrell and Parker, like Holland et al., recognize that literacy and identity develop through complex and socially situated circumstances. Further, they recognize how that development is improvised. The improvised moments and the quality of improvisation itself do not receive attention from Luttrell and Parker nor Holland et al.

Luttrell and Parker arrive at worthwhile conclusions, but I believe a theory of improvisation would allow for a more detailed accounting of the ways students improvise their literacy and identity in the individual moments where those literacies and identities are created and creating. Luttrell and Parker (2001) conclude:

> In this paper we have argued that there is a complex and dialogic relationship between students' literacy practices and their evolving identities in the figured worlds in which they are recruited and participate. Students use their literacy practices to form their identities within, and sometimes in opposition to, these figured worlds of school, work and family. (p. 245)

I agree with these conclusions, but I am left with big questions about how this "complex and dialogic relationship" looks from one moment to the next. The comparison of students' literacies and identities between specific figured worlds (school, work, and family) rely on largely "before and after" sorts of observations. The research looks at the differences between students as they exist in one figured world in comparison or contrast to another of their figured worlds. By examining the moment to moment interaction, the improvisation, in one figured world and then another, researchers might be able to

explain more of the how and why behind the different identities and literacies that arise within various students in various figured worlds. Observing the ways a student thinks about their literacy differently while at home and while at school is important and worthwhile. However, I am suggesting that noticing the difference is not enough. A theory of improvisation would allow for the examination of those moments that add up to the different literacies and identities in a given set of figured worlds.

The figured worlds of Urban Education have a great stake in better understanding the ways students form, negotiate, adopt, and utilize their various literacies and identities. The figured worlds framework has been used readily by researchers in the field to help contextualize all of the various pressures and components of experience that contribute to the ways urban students are simultaneously created by and creating their social lives. Urrieta (2007) opens a special issue of *The Urban Review* writing about the promise of figured worlds for work in Urban Education:

> Holland et al.'s sociocultural practice theory of self and identity focus attention on figured worlds as sites of possibility (in terms of agency), but also state the figured worlds are a social reality that lives within dispositions mediated by relations of power. Because figured worlds are peopled by characters from collective imaginings (e.g., of class, race, gender, nationality), people's identity and agency is formed dialectically and dialogically in them. Holland et al.'s concept of figured worlds is therefore a useful concept to study identity and agency in education. It is not set on previous static notions of culture; it focuses on activity and emphasizes the importance of power. (p. 109)

I agree with Urrieta's assessment of the utility of figured worlds as a way of thinking about education. In particular, I, too, appreciate the ways "relations of power" can be attended to through this particular framework. The reading of figured worlds seems to be reasonably consistent across these various examples. The main differences arise from emphasis. In this case, power relations are prominently situated in the use of the concept. However, as with Luttrell and Parker (2001), Urrieta makes no mention of the ways power arises from the improvised moments that take place within figured worlds. He makes mention of the improvisational qualities of figured worlds, like Luttrell and Parker, without ever suggesting anything about the way those qualities might be worth scrutiny in themselves and not just as a quality of the figured world. I am suggesting the improvised quality of figured worlds needs to be examined from one moment to the next in an effort to see the ways that a figured world creates and is created by those same individual improvised moments that are the components of an individual's literacy and identity.

Urrieta acknowledges the performative qualities of figured worlds as important and even mentions the ways those qualities combine to form the opportunities or possibilities for new literacy and identity. The development of new literacy and identity is central to Urban Education where students are, at times, limited in terms of the literacies and identities they have access to within a given figured world. Urrieta (2007) writes:

> Holland et al. state, following Bakhtin, that the world must be answered. Authorship is not a choice; however, the form of the answer is not predetermined...Social play, or the "arts and rituals created on the margins in

> newly imagined communities" can help people develop new competencies to participate in or further develop these new, sometimes marginal figured worlds. In these new (novel) figured worlds lies the possibility for making/creating new ways, artifacts, discourses, acts, perhaps even more liberatory worlds. (p. 111)

The utility of figured worlds to help contextualize student development comes across in all of these works. The figured worlds concept provides a way forward in terms of explaining the development of students as they navigate back and forth between the demands and constraints of their lives. I continue to hope I can provide a way forward in being even more precise about how the "making/creating" represents an improvised process within figured worlds. Figured worlds provides the necessary conceptual framework for understanding the big picture of literacy and identity formation. Figured worlds provides the means of understanding the various metaphorical theatrical stages where performances of literacy and identity take place. Improv theory would allow for the understanding of those same performances on the level of each participant's words and actions. Figured worlds theory helps us to understand the place and the context for the action. To a certain extent, figured worlds even helps to explain the big picture of the sum of the actions taking place on a given stage. Improv theory would enable us to examine the individual exchanges taking place on that stage. Individual actions, offers, would be available for scrutiny if a theory of improvisation could account for the improvised qualities of the scene acknowledged, but not analyzed or thickly described, by figured worlds.

There have been other works that offered a more fine-grained analysis of the action in figured worlds. However, the following example pays closer attention to the actions within figured worlds in a way that manages to leave the improvisational quality unobserved and unanalyzed. Yet, Vågan (2011) does attend carefully to the individual moments within figured worlds, which I believe is a productive step toward better understanding how literacy and identity arise from within figured worlds. Vågan focuses on the pedagogical approaches to medical school training, but he remains focused on the ways certain figured worlds adopt particular pedagogical choices in an effort to derive particular literacies and identities. Toward the end of the article, Vågan (2011) outlines the utility of his approach:

> In this article I have outlined and exemplified how a sociocultural approach to identity formation can be used to shed light upon student's self-identities in educational contexts and activities. The approach consists of the complementarities of a discursive-based theory of positioning through linguistic means and a perspective of identity as shaped in cultural worlds...Supplementing this positioning framework with the contributions of Wortham and others provides a more systematic and fine-grained analysis of the actual devices people use to position themselves in discourse. Such analysis reminds us that people's cultural worlds take place as social processes. By using discursive devices in their stories of clinical training students not only represent narrated events and characters within a figured world...but also position and reposition themselves in the storytelling even in relationship to events and characters in this world. (p. 54-55)

Vågan here provides one last example of scholars using Holland et al. to frame an identity formation process that is complicated and contextualized within a figured world. Like Vågan, my hope is to offer "systematic and fine-grained analysis" of the action that takes place within the figured world. Indeed, both my autoethnographic and example analysis will include discussion of discourse and the specific discursive moments in the context of social processes found in scenes of literacy learning. However, where Vågan aims to look at the devices of discourse, I would propose there is a way of looking at the improvised moments within a figured world to better understand how and why particular literacy and identity develop.

Figured Worlds of Literacy and Identity

Having positioned Holland et al. as well as examples of research using Holland et al. within the context of improvised worlds of teaching and learning, I now make mention of other research invested more purely in literacy and identity as subject matter. While still mentioning the idea, many of these works rely less directly on figured worlds for their theoretical grounding. However, I read many of these pieces as worthwhile for understanding the various ways scholars have seen value in researching literacy and identity in the first place. I will critique some of these works in order to point out those examples where a theory of improvisation might prove useful.

This section will begin with someone else's review of research that acknowledges the pre-existing need for projects that more carefully connect literacy and identity. Moje and Luke (2009) provide a starting point for thinking about the deeply interconnected nature of literacy and identity. The review specifically calls for a more nuanced

understanding of the ways scholars deploy the term "identity." Moje and Luke (2009) posit:

> Few literacy studies have acknowledged this range of perspectives on and views for conceptualizing identity and yet, subtle differences in identity theories have widely different implications for how one thinks about both how literacy matters to identity and how identity matters to literacy. The authors…encourage more theorizing of both literacy and identity as social practices and…of how the two breathe life into each other. (p. 415)

This kind of nuanced theorizing parallels the kind of work necessary for incorporating improvisation studies into conversations about literacy and identity. For the moment, I am keeping the identity theory found in Holland et al. as the framework best suited for helping me to observe, describe, and analyze the improvisation that gives rise of literacy and identity.

Even in the broader field of literacy research, I am in good company when it comes to relying on Holland et al. For example, Bartlett (2007) uses the sociocultural approach (and I believe the performative turn discussed in Chapter 2 is a part of what constitutes the sociocultural approach) proposed by Holland et al. and then advocates, "Studies of literacy and identity could profit from attending to other elements of Holland et al.'s sociocultural approach…figured world, positionality, and space of authoring" (p. 65). Bartlett's article attends to the particular ways developing literate identity is an ongoing process constantly being contested. Again, relying in part on Holland et al., Bartlett positions this study in the context of "sociocultural theories of continuous identity formation" (p. 51). Bartlett provides a useful example of research that rigorously

applies the theoretical underpinnings of Holland et al. I also take Bartlett's example as another justification for pursuing a part of the figured worlds framework that has not been fully realized. The improvisational quality of figured worlds remains somewhat neglected in terms of investigation and application of this central tenet of the theory.

Benson (2010) provides another example of literacy and identity research utilizing a sociocultural theoretical approach. However, this article calls upon slightly different theoretical works. Benson relies on Brandt (2001) and Barton (2007) in order to better understand the ways the early formation of literate or illiterate identities has lasting impact on the development of literacy and identity throughout a person's life. As before, this research seeks to understand literacy and identity as mutually created by and creating one another. Benson highlights the ways this process can be liberating or debilitating depending on the particular developmental experiences of a given individual. This research represents another kind of category that looks at adult literacy as the main object of scrutiny (B. Smith, 2004). I am interested in the literacy and identity developed by both the adults and the children in scenes of literacy learning. Benson's emphasis on the connection between literacy and identity helps to justify the study of both literacy and identity in unison. I would not want to dissociate literacy and identity (or adults and children for that matter) when examining the improvised quality of both as they happen in the classroom.

In part, the interconnection of literacy and identity comes from the fact of a particular action or moment being associated with the development of both literacy and identity together. Twiselton (2004) utilizes activity theory in an effort to better understand the ways student teachers develop literacies and identities in themselves and

their students. Twiselton calls upon Bourdieu (1977) as one of the principal theorists necessary for categorizing different student teacher identities and the particular ways each of those identities inform how the student teacher thought about the various literacies involved in their teaching. With regard to theory, Twiselton (2004) notes:

> Activity theory echoes Bourdieu's concept of habitus and field to allow us to see that identity and context are intertwined, shaping and shaped by…The particular contribution of activity theory here is the potential to enable an analysis of the formation of the social practices within which identities are (per)formed. (p. 163)

This statement helps to further articulate the ways literacy and identity cannot be separated. Additionally, literacy and identity cannot be separated from their sociocultural context. The study of literacy and identity necessitates understanding people in social contexts. While attending to social contexts, this study of student teacher literacy learning does not provide a complete picture. The work done in this study provides another socially constructed piece of that picture. The interaction of these pieces sometimes benefits from analysis focused on the discourse between the various improvised elements of the social situation.

Discourse analysis theory provides yet another important category of theoretical framework that intermingles with almost all of those theories already mentioned. Binder and Kotsopoulos (2011) attend to the multiple literacies theory of literacy and identity through a critical lens of discourse analysis. Gee (2006) provides the main source of discourse analysis theory in this particular article. The discourse analysis framework used by Binder and Kotsopoulos continues to illustrate the insistence on understanding both literacy and identity as socially constructed and therefore in need of sociocultural

investigation. This particular article considers the ways children develop identity through the development of multimodal literacies in the arts. Similarly, Compton-Lilly (2006) addresses childhood literacy and identity by understanding the two elements to be intimately interconnected, “the identities we construct shape our literacy practices while literacy practices become a means for acting out the identities we assume” (p. 57). This statement succinctly reflects the way many of these scholars work to articulate how literacy and identity mutually influence one another. This mutual influence and “acting out of identities” is improvised, and an improv theory is necessary for a more complete understanding of the relational influences.

With these additional theoretical frames in mind, Erstad, Gilje, Sefton-Green, and Vasbø (2009) offer a worthwhile return to literacy and identity research focused on students. This article takes up the concept of “learning lives” as a means of reviewing a number of studies that examined the ways literacy and identity get intertwined throughout the schooling experience of children. The “learning lives” concept still fits neatly into the figured worlds of Holland et al. (2003) as well as a number of other New Literacy Studies scholars (Barton, 2007; Heath, 1983; Street, 2001). Still focused on children and using many of the same foundational theorists, Godley (2003) examines the way students’ literacies impact the processes in which they adopt gendered identities for themselves and others.

Studies of gender, as it relates to literacy and identity in children, parallel some of the research that thinks about children’s play as an important site of literacy and identity development. In some of the same ways literacy and identity research examines work with adults, Kendrick (2005) studies the literacy and identity issues surrounding

children's play. The subject of children's play has also served an inroad to research on improvisation in the work of Sawyer and Lobman. In particular, Kendrick hones in on the ways children "play house." Calling on the sociocultural theorists already mentioned (Bakhtin, 1981; Holland et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), Kendrick (2005) writes, "Play…becomes a 'space of authoring' where authorship is a matter of orchestration, of arranging the identifiable social discourse and practices that constitute one's social and cultural resources" (p. 8). Play provides the conceptual, sociocultural object of scrutiny for this article. Play serves as the "work" children do in ways that allow for the creation and deployment of literacies and identities. Improvisation is a fundamental part of play, and therefore cannot be separated out from a thorough analysis of literacy and identity.

Paying close attention to the minute moments of children's play and discourse also forms the bedrock of another article that attempts to describe the intimate connections between literacy and identity. Wallace (2008) interviewed children and discussed literacy and identity with them directly. In doing so, she was able to delineate a number of different identities that were revealed in different ways and played out utilizing different literacies for the children interviewed. About the connection between literacy and identity, Wallace (2008) writes:

> Identity allegiances, linked to gender, social class, or religion, come into play both in what we opt to read in the first place and how we process text. What is salient for a reader is in part related to the identities invoked. (p. 64)

Yet again, Wallace provides an example of a scholar describing the uniquely intricate connections between literacy and identity. I offer these examples as further instances of research that seem either focused exclusively on the micro or the macro in terms of

gathering data to explicate the complicated development of literacy and identity. A theory of improvisation would enable moves back and forth between the largest frame of figured worlds and the smallest moments of particular words or actions.

The conclusion of this section will examine a few examples of research in literacy and identity that understand these two entities as tools of critique or victims of criticism. As Urrieta (2007) hinted at above, literacy and identity are central elements for understanding the ways students and teachers negotiate, share, and construct power and knowledge between one another. I offer these last few examples as a way back to thinking about the critical role a theory of improvisation could play in terms of helping teachers and students reflect and act more purposefully in scenes as they do the difficult work of learning. K. Smith (2008) offers an example of a study that examines student literacy and identity from the vantage point of tracking. This study differs slightly from those already mentioned about schoolchildren in that the examination of literacy and identity gets used as a means of critiquing a particular schooling practice (i.e. tracking). K. Smith's article uses the same sorts of sociocultural theorizing to investigate a particular kind of literacy and identity formation. This critical ethnography offers an example of the ways sociocultural theory can be used as a critical theory. K. Smith (2008) writes, "What is particularly important is how specific literacy events contributed to those commonalities, as well as how performative language and literacy practices constructed the participants as 'honours students', a construction that some students accepted and others resisted" (p. 485). K. Smith examines the literacy and identity of acceptance and resistance as a means of critiquing the practice of tracking.

The critique of a particular practice can involve literacy and identity when the teacher or the student engages in critical literacy. Literacy and identity prove to be central concepts whether the teacher fosters critical literacy or the student learns to develop critical literacy. Tate (2011) argues for the importance of critical texts as a means of providing students and their writing a transformative experience. Tate (2011) concludes:

> While the critical textual production can give students, researchers and teachers the opportunity to understand the practices and pedagogies that help students produce quality academic writing, more importantly, the critical textual production demonstrates how this process within a critical literacy framework can help students understand the value of constructing texts that work to merge language, access and power in the interest of a more just society. (p. 207)

Tate offers another vantage point for thinking about literacy and identity and how critical texts impact both aspects of a student's person. The conversation about critical literacy offers one more way of thinking about how literacy and identity interconnect. The greater the quantity and variety of critical literacy a student develops the greater the opportunity for understanding the various identities they could (or already do) inhabit.

Williams (2007) offers another kind of critique while studying literacy and identity. Williams describes the seemingly perpetual crisis of literacy in the US. His description suggests that there are a number of reasons for this crisis that have nothing to do with students' actual literacy. Further, Williams argues that the identity being put on students in this context does damage to the development of both literacy and identity. Williams (2007) concludes, "If we want to serve students best in their literacy

education we should not scare them with tales of the literacy crisis of their generation but instead teach them how to understand how language, culture, and identity work together" (p. 181). Even in the midst of his critique, Williams, like most of the scholars mentioned, acknowledges the complicated and connected importance of literacy and identity. A theory of improvisation would provide one more lens for better unpacking the complicated, situated, and vital development of literacy and identity in a way that would enable educators and education researchers to be more proficient at developing desirable literacies and identities.

Improvisation Studies in Education

Until now, I have focused on research that I believe would benefit from a theory of improvisation. Those works already mentioned largely agree with the ideas of Holland et al. in terms of acknowledging the improvisational quality of figured worlds. Having made an approach at improvisation through figured worlds, this section will address education research that largely does not acknowledge the figured worlds framework but still focuses on developing more sophisticated understanding of literacy and identity formation in scenes of literacy learning. This body of research approaches the problem from the vantage point of improvisation. The other shift from the research already mentioned seems to be toward developing specific literacies and identities that, for one reason or another, have been deemed particularly desirable given current trends. When these scholars look to help develop creative or innovative or collaborative students, I believe they are working to develop particular kinds of literacy and identity.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Sawyer's (2011a) "A call to action: The challenges of creative teaching and learning," offers a brief review of research that illustrates the long-

standing interest in having students learn creativity, innovation, and collaboration as part of their standard curriculum. The contemporary arguments for these traits or literacies or identities as learning outcomes arise from perceptions about the need for student creativity, innovation, and collaboration in terms of navigating an evolving social and economic order complicated by technology and globalization. Sawyer focuses on creativity, but there are a number of skills and traits enumerated on lists of 21st century skills that could be a part of the problem Sawyer refers to as the "teaching paradox." The improv lens being crafted in this study should prove useful in studying the paradoxical balance between structure and improvisation. The rest of this section of the chapter focuses on a number of branches within the category of "improvisation studies in education". Ultimately, improvisation studies in education represents the convergence of research agendas from a number of fields. However, the studies collated here all attend to the ways improvisation describes a particular quality in scenes of literacy learning that needs attention in order to better understand the complexity of a given classroom.

Psychological and Linguistic Backgrounds

Sawyer has been a consolidating force in terms of drawing together a number of research agendas in an effort to think about the fundamental problems of education in the 21st century with an eye toward sorting out those problems by shifting the paradigmatic approach to education that seems to have been in place since the 19th century. Before focusing on problems particular to education, Sawyer's own research has ranged and evolved from examining the improvisational nature of human conversation and interaction (1997b, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 with Berson, 2006a) to the ways creativity and innovation connect with ideas about improvisation (1998, 2005, 2006c). Recently,

Sawyer (2004a, 2004b, 2006b) has combined these threads of research in order to address the teaching paradox described above (and earlier in Chapter 2). All of these efforts have synthesized a great deal of research regarding the ways improvisation is a fundamental means of understanding teaching and learning. Sawyer never quite studies the improvised quality of scenes of literacy learning, but he acknowledges and makes use of the fact of improvisation in his latest research on education.

Sawyer (2011b) edited a recent collection of chapters under the title *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*. This volume brings together a number of other important researchers and threads of research in a continuing effort to draw attention to the utility of providing teachers (preservice and otherwise) with a new way of thinking about teaching and learning that will help educators prepare students for the particular obstacles and opportunities awaiting them in the 21st century. Erickson's (2011) contribution to this volume again synthesizes a range of works both historically and topically. Erickson approaches the improvisational quality of teaching and learning from his vantage point in applied linguistics. Again, this approach mirrors some of the work Sawyer has done in thinking about the fundamentally improvisational quality of conversation. Erickson has long been interested in classroom conversation as improvisation. Erickson (1982) succinctly articulates the following formulation of classroom discourse and improvisation:

> a theory of school lessons as educational encounters; partially bounded situations in which teachers and students follow previously learned, culturally normative "rules," and also innovate by making new kinds of sense together in adapting to the fortuitous circumstances of the moment. Students are seen as active

> participants in this process, not simply as passive recipients of external shaping. Teacher and students are seen as engaged in praxis, improvising situational variations within and around socioculturally prescribed thematic material and occasionally, within the process of improvisation, discovering new possibilities for learning and social life. (p. 166)

Erickson's description aligns with much of the other research found in this chapter. In particular, this passage echoes the ideas of a figured world that relies on improvisational qualities for the development of new literacy and identity. The emphasis on discourse and improvisation helps me to justify some of my later methodological choices about critical discourse analysis and improv theory. Additionally, Erickson's ideas recall some of the research in literacy studies and hints at the ways improvisation could offer another way of thinking about literacy contextualized in a classroom. Erickson's understanding of the classroom has been theoretically articulated and observed repeatedly since his book chapter (Cazden, 2001; Gershon, 2006). Recent developments like those in Sawyer's (2011b) volume have begun emphasizing the need for this theoretical view to be adopted by teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers in an effort to help all constituents in the education system better thrive in the changing circumstances of the world around them. In order to evolve, improvisation is a must. Part of my argument is to suggest that thriving in these changing circumstances means having a better understanding of the ways literacy and identity productively develop through improvised scenes in classrooms.

Contemporary Improvisation Studies in Education

Erickson and Sawyer have shifted their research toward education from their initial areas of expertise (linguistics and psychology respectively). More and more teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers (Barker & Borko, 2011) have begun to synthesize research traditions towards investigation of the balance between structure and improvisation in education. The breadth and depth of application for research in the area of structure and improvisation in education is considerable. Having consumed lines of inquiry that arrive at this paradox of structure and improvisation from the outside, there are a number of other areas of research in improv studies in education that bear mentioning given the widespread utility of these ideas. The next series of references will account for the ways education researchers have recently attempted to address the paradox Sawyer presents. I will continue to highlight the ways I see these studies contributing to the overarching purpose of better understanding the improvised development of literacy and identity in scenes of literacy learning.

Sawyer's paradox has been addressed both practically and theoretically by a number of researchers. However, recent research has turned toward synthesizing the practical and theoretical. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) have moved beyond theory building to provide a practical guidebook for teachers interested in using improvisational skills and exercises to deliver content specific lessons. Like the improvisational theater texts examined in the final part of this chapter, Lobman's expertise as an improviser informs her research of structure and improvisation. Lobman (2005, 2006) also brings experience as a teacher educator developing teachers in the field through professional development that prepares educators to be better improvisers. Lobman's research also

usefully represents the ways improvisation education for teachers has been productively utilized to improve the learning of marginalized student groups.

Further, Lobman provides an example of the ways much research regarding structure and improvisation in education looks beyond research like Sawyer and Erickson's to foundational theorists (i.e. Vygotsky) of the constructivist classroom. With regard to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Lobman and Lundquist (2007) write:

> We...see the ZPD as a creative, improvisational activity. The ZPD is the activity of people creating environments where children (and adults) can take risks, make mistakes, and support one another to do what they do not yet know how to do. From this perspective the ZPD is not a technique, or even a distance. It is an activity, an activity that people engage in together. It is by participating in creating environments where learning can occur that children learn. (p. 6)

The environment described here is another way of thinking about a figured world. Lobman and Lundquist do not acknowledge this connection explicitly, but I believe the sociocultural roots utilized here, and in Holland et al., offer a means of producing more productive figured worlds. Better understanding the improvised quality of figured worlds would allow educators and education researchers to produce scenes of literacy learning or figured worlds where "children learn" new literacies and identities according to their particular needs and abilities.

Although not always explicitly, most of the research examined in this chapter offers a version of this narrative about improvisation being a part of classroom practice and, therefore, worthy of scrutiny in the name of improving that part of the

practice. Beghetto and Kaufman (2011) offer another formulation of the ways disciplined improvisation can provide teachers a way of thinking about their practice that would allow for the navigation of imposed and implicit education structures. They offer examples of the ways teachers need to be able to think about their classroom discourse as a kind of ensemble performance whereby teachers and students creatively collaborate in an effort to learn. Planning for improvisation is the main problem they try to address with this mindset of disciplined improvisation. Beghetto and Kaufman represent the latest evolution of education research in the area of improvisation. They have consumed the earlier work of the likes of Sawyer and Erickson. Having done so, these researchers productively offer theoretical and practical advice for helping teachers establish a more improvisational approach to teaching and learning. Their research fits into the paradigm that argues for this approach being necessary for helping students to prepare for a world that will demand creative, collaborative, improvised innovations and solutions. Similarly, this line of research complements scholars, like Stanton and Gonzalez (2011), who are making similar arguments for preservice teacher education.

Before offering one final, illustrative example of education research at the leading edge of improvisation studies, there exists another vein of research worth mentioning. There are a number of articles published in the last few years offering examples of researchers attempting to make the connections between the particular kind of teaching they study and improvisation. In each instance, I would argue these studies arise from a particular figured world with the researcher invested in better understanding the particular literacies and identities inherently necessary and being developed in order to successfully live in that particular figured world. This research includes articles geared

toward improving teaching at the university level through improvisation (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Hackbert, 2010; Holmes & Qureshi, 2006; Huffaker & West, 2005; Lane, 2011; Murphy & Hajnal, 2009). There are also articles aimed at using improvisational ideas and models to deliver content specific lessons in elementary and secondary schools (Donmoyer, 1983; Gallagher, 2010; Harlow, 2009; Kelly, Brown, & Crawford, 2000; Macklin, Hvenegaard, & Johnson, 2010; Martin, Towers, & Pirie, 2006). In both cases, this type of article illustrates the practical application of the theoretical work undertaken by the research outlined in the other sections of this review. These articles provide worthwhile research methods for consideration when grappling with the difficult problem of designing a research project to study improvisation.

The Future of Improvisation Studies in Education

I conclude this section with one final example of research aimed at looking forward to new developments in the field. DeZutter (2011) represents a contemporary moment in the field of education research interested in the connections between improvisation studies and education. DeZutter most closely resembles my position as a researcher. She brings her experiences as a teacher, teacher-educator, education researcher, and improviser to bear on the teaching paradox. Her chapter in Sawyer's (2011b) collection directly articulates her vision and understanding of teaching and learning as dynamic, improvised processes. Further, she explicitly advocates for improvisation being a fundamental part of preservice teacher education as well as teacher professional development. She ends her discussion by articulating a number of important developments she believes need to come out of education research if improvisation is to be used in the ways she advocates.

As introduced in Chapter 2, DeZutter (2011) proposes the need for a unified understanding of improvisation as it relates to learning as well as literacy and identity. The research of this dissertation aims to develop tools for cultivating the body of knowledge DeZutter describes. With this call to education researchers in mind, DeZutter concludes her article by making another proposal to teacher educators writing, "Therefore, it will be important for teacher educators to help future teachers unearth their assumptions about teaching, including those related to improvisation, and to create opportunities for them to develop more robust understandings of the teaching process and why improvisation is central to it" (p. 47). Here again, I hope this dissertation is a small step toward enabling research that would help teacher educators to fulfill this request.

Figured Worlds of Improvisational Theater

The last section of this chapter works through a number of texts from the field of improvisational theater. Most of these works do not come from acknowledged research traditions. Rather, these works arise from the thinking and experience of numerous practitioners and artists from the 20th and 21st century. I make mention and introduce these works in this chapter, but I make more thorough use of them in deriving an improv theory in the final chapters. Choosing a place to start the history of improvisation is difficult. Typically, the story of improvisation as an art form refers all the way back to ancient Greek drama and then jumps ahead to Commedia dell'arte in the Renaissance (Leep, 2008, p. 6-9). The next jump tends to be into the development of improvisational theater work in America in the early to middle part of the 20th century. In short, improvisation has a long and complex history that has accumulated more than enough principle and practice for transposition into the field of education research.

The complexity of this history, while interesting, does not require more than the mention just made. Instead, this section will address a number of texts that consistently appear on the shelves of aspiring actors and comedians as well as in the bibliographies of improvisation studies in education research. The second part of this section will review the more contemporary work that rests upon the earlier texts. Both sections are important as these will be the principal texts used in the autoethnographic development of improv theory.

Classical Texts of Improvisational Theater

The foundational theoretical texts of improvisational theater in the 20th century (Johstone, 1992; Spolin, 1999) need to be considered in order to better understand some of the fundamental concepts this study will be working with to synthesize and transpose a lens for examining scenes of literacy learning. The triptych of listening, affirming, and playing comes first from these fundamental works. Ultimately, these works do not fit neatly into the rest of this chapter in part because they are not considered formal works of research. These texts are acknowledged and ignored by turns in the research literature surrounding improvisation studies in education. The research undertaken in this dissertation depends upon the adaptation of these works to the specific needs of teachers, teacher educators, and education researchers in order to build a body of knowledge about improvisational theater for use by those interested in education. Improvisational theater texts run the gamut from classic to contemporary, but those examined here represent standard reading for those individuals and ensembles interested in improvisation as a performance art.

Keith Johnstone (1992) and Viola Spolin (1999) both begin by reviewing the development of improvisational theater in the United States during the 20th century. Both figures have served as important performers, directors, and writers in the field of improvisational theater. Johnstone offers a theoretical framework for improvisation as a theatrical art form that depends upon the relationships developed between characters on stage and improvisers within a performance ensemble. His book provides a number of exercises for developing ensemble and helping performers to cultivate worthwhile character relationships in their scenes. His work represents some of the most overtly theoretical in the field. He seems equally interested in providing practical exercise while grounding that exercise in a theoretical framework.

Spolin (1986, 1999) has written a number of books around the topic of improvisation as a method of helping to prepare actors for the stage. She introduces a thorough curriculum that covers a broad range of exercises for students of all ages and abilities. Some of her work directly addresses the ways teachers might use improvisation to the benefit of their students. Her work is pedagogical in terms of having beliefs about the way she approaches teaching within her discipline. Spolin provides a wealth of information not only describing the exercises but also offering suggestions about how and why those exercises work for different groups. These texts represent an adaptable curriculum for pre-service teachers. Further, these texts offer another source from which to draw out an improv lens to be used as a tool of research.

Contemporary Texts of Improvisational Theater

Both Spolin and Johnstone feature prominently in contemporary works about improvisational theater. These newer texts expand on the theoretical grounding provided

in the older works and include a range of exercises and applications specific to the performance art of improvisational theater. Numerous improvisational theater directors and practitioners (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008; see also Carrane & Allen, 2006; Chin, 2009; Gwinn, 2007; Halpern, 1994, 2005; Napier, 2004; Scruggs & Gellman, 2008) have collections of various lengths offering improvisational theater curriculum in varying degrees of detail and cross-applicability. Some texts even deal with teachers (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008) in the same way that Spolin's (1999) workbook aims to help teachers in their respective classrooms. Similar to Sawyer's teaching paradox, McKnight and Scruggs (2008) write:

> Improvisation is an ideal pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning because it has both inherent structure and flexibility. The inherent structure stems from the rules of each game and the process of problem solving that players must apply to achieve a satisfying experience in playing the game. Flexibility stems from simplicity; no props, scenery, costumes, lighting are required. The players create everything that is needed from their own imagination. (p. 6)

This quote succinctly summarizes the fundamental adaptation made by improvisers thinking about classroom practice. These works are drawing the attention of education researchers in search of ways to enhance the improvisational skill sets of teachers and students. Although not often utilized, these works also offer additional starting points for unveiling the theories implicit and explicit in improvisational theater that could be bent toward analyzing scenes of literacy learning. All of these improvisational theater texts offer a data set for analysis in terms of beginning to develop a theory of improvisation that could be used to observe and analyze the improvisational qualities of those figured

worlds where students and teachers collectively develop and utilize literacies and identities.

Final Notes on the Scene

By turns, this chapter outlined scenes of research, formal and informal, where figured worlds provided the largest of pictures for understanding scenes of literacy learning. The research using this conceptual framework illustrates the ways researchers use figured worlds to situate and offer analysis of their various subject matter. In each case, a different theory needed to be used to offer close analysis of the building blocks that comprised the figured world. These same works no more than acknowledged the improvisation of figured worlds. These acknowledgements did not extend the work of Holland et al. A theory of improvisation would allow for the acknowledgement and analysis of the improvised moments themselves that make up the particular figured world.

The development of literacy and identity in figured worlds would benefit from this theory of improvisation because those moments of improvisation are precisely the manifestation of the negotiation and acquisition of literacy and identity. The literacy and identity research outlined in this chapter highlights a number of ways in which the study of literacy and identity requires as sophisticated a tool set as possible given the importance placed on human beings developing fruitful identities and literacies so that they might be constructive members of their social worlds.

The works from the field of improvisation studies in education illustrate the ways improvisation has already begun to be taken up as subject matter to examine a number of different scenes of literacy learning. In most instances, these works were implicitly

engaged in some kind of literacy and identity research as well. Across all of these examples, researchers seem willing and able to observe the quality of improvisation in scenes of literacy learning just enough to notice that improvisation exists. However, the work on improvisation ends with this notice in most cases. These works would benefit from a theory of improvisation that specifically attends to the figured worlds of classrooms in an effort to articulate the "how" and "why" of improvised literacy and identity development.

The improvisational theater texts were initially referenced here to begin to hint at the data set available for scrutiny in terms of developing the theory of improvisation called for in the other sections of this chapter. These texts will be central to the autoethnographic theory building to be done in Chapter 4. The works of improvisational theater need to be transposed and translated into a theory of improvisation if there is to be any hope of studying the quality of improvisation as part of the figured worlds of scenes of literacy learning where literacy and identity develop.

CHAPTER 4: AN IMPROV THEORY OF LEARNING

"Improvisation: Playing the game; setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem; it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene; a predominant function of the intuitive; playing the game brings opportunity to learn theater to a cross-section of people; "playing it by ear"; process as opposed to result; not ad-lib or "originality" or "making it up yourself"; a form, if understood, possible to any age group; setting object in motion between players as in a game; solving problems together; the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene; a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or storyline for the communication; an art form; transformation; bring forth details and relationships as organic whole; living process" (Spolin, 1963/1999, p. 361)

Introduction

Developing a formalized improv theory presents a number of unique opportunities and challenges. Writers from within the improvisational theater community have written a great deal about the principles and practice associated with the performance art of improvisation. This rich body of work provides rich opportunity for finding a theoretical framework capable of observing improvisation in scenes of learning. However, this same body of work is inherently removed from the practice and performance of improvisational theater. Improvisational theater performers are not taught to improvise

through the reading of texts about improvisational theater. The principles of improvisation, while occasionally codified in book-length accounts, rarely get passed down by reading a book. Instead these principles evolve and get passed along through practice and in-person classes between ensembles of improvisers and directors or coaches.

This method of developing and sharing a theoretical framework does not represent a unique process, but it does complicate the theory-building taking place in this dissertation. Sawyer (1997a) describes this development and sharing of principles as an ethnotheory:

> In an improv training class, aspiring actors are taught a set of principles that, when followed, result in more interesting, more dramatically true performances. I am fascinated by these principles, because they form a theory of discursive action, developed not through armchair speculation, but through repeated experience with what works and doesn't work: a theory that has emerged from practice. Anthropologists used the term *ethnotheory* to refer to the theories that people have about their own behavior. Because improvisational actors spend so much time in training and rehearsal, they have developed a particularly elaborate ethnotheory about stage dialogues. Improvisational theater is a kind of "workbench" in which this ethnotheory of conversational interaction is tested in front of a live audience. (p. 172)

Sawyer struggles, as I do, to make use of the improviser's ethnotheory in a context other than improvisational theater. Like Sawyer, I see value in the crossover because I believe the improvisation that takes place in scenes of learning can be better observed and

analyzed using a version of the ethnotheory improvisers gather through their practice. As such, this chapter represents my attempt to transpose the ethnotheory of improvisational theater in such a way that the improvisation within scenes of learning can be made more available for understanding and meaning making in the thick description needed in education research.

In the balance of this chapter, I offer an initial iteration of improv theory. First, having undertaken the theory-building of the previous two chapters, I offer a succinct, yet detailed, account of what I mean when I refer to improv theory. This account will arise from two principal sources. For the first source, I offer an understanding of improv theory through the words, warm-ups, exercises, and games of improvisational theater. These examples explain the categories of *listening*, *affirming*, and *playing* by illustrating how these activities are developed in the context of improvisational theater. For the second source, each of these examples, placed in and across the categories, will be further illustrated with observations taken from my own classroom.

In Chapter 5, the final formulation and application of improv theory (at least in this dissertation) will show the ways the theory can be used to re-read prior research and data as well as compliment another analytical framework. The final example, and conclusion, of this dissertation will be a sample of discourse analysis that simultaneously makes use of the improv theory built in the first four chapters and brought to its final form in the fifth chapter. As briefly described at the outset of the dissertation, the autoethnographic theory building undertaken in this project closes here with a version of improv theory that I believe represents a framework of enough substance to undertake further development and continued building beyond the scope of this initial project. I

will conclude the dissertation with closing thoughts that ideally open and introduce future possibilities for continuing to pursue the research scene set up in this dissertation.

Improv Theory

As mentioned in the first chapter, improv theory serves to provide thick description of the performative quality of improvisation as observed in scenes of learning. Improv theory enables observations about the ways participants improvise in terms of listening, affirming, and playing. These terms stand as nodes that encapsulate a constellation of other concepts. These terms describe the improvisation in ways that allow the observer to think about the productivity of the improvised scene in question. Figure 1 below illustrates the interconnected ways these terms are overarching in a scene of learning while also being embedded in specific moments from the scene.

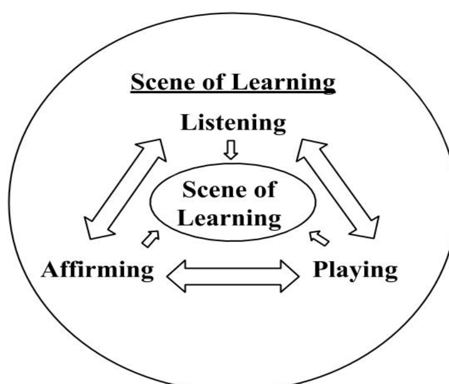

Figure 1- Improv Theory

Improv theory is a distilled set of categories derived from improvisational theater ideas, activities, and exercises. I come by these ideas, activities, and exercises as a researcher having done a great deal of reading. Further, as an improviser in the context of improvisational theater, I share these ideas and the improvisational theater ethnotheory

through years of practicing and playing at improvisation with groups from Durham to Chicago and Charlotte. *Listening*, *affirming*, and *playing* serve as labels for three categories that can be used to encapsulate the shared ethnotheory of the improvisational theater community. These three categories, and their respective sets of ideas, activities, and exercises, offer a starting point for education researchers to create thick description of the improvisation that occurs in scenes of learning. In particular, the thick description made possible by improv theory helps to make meaning of the improvisational quality of the learning processes where literacy and identity develop in students and teachers.

In order to better understand these categories and their application, individually and collectively, in thickly describing the improvisation in scenes of learning, I will take each category in turn to illustrate where the category comes from in the literature and thinking of improvisational theater while also applying the category as a means of describing a particular moment within a scene of learning taken from my own classroom. For each category, I combine the defining work from the literature with freshly gathered data from my class. Before I start combining, a brief set of notes about my freshly gathered classroom data.

In the fall of 2013, I sought and received IRB approval to videotape my own classroom teaching in an effort to gather data that would be used for illustrative purposes in building an improv theory. I teach upper school English at an affluent, independent TK-12 school in South Charlotte. The total students population is over 1500 students with just over 20% students of color. The upper school division where I teach has approximately 535 students. I teach two sections of the required sophomore English course. The videotaped data used in this chapter comes from one of those two sections. I

obtained student assent and parental consent for all of the students in this section who appear in the transcript I will use for the examples below. All of the names have been changed using pseudonyms the students chose for themselves.

The specific transcript (Appendix A and B) used here comes from two videotaped classroom scenes that I have joined together to create an approximately eight and a half minute video clip taken of my classroom teaching. The first minute of the clip shows the opening of a class session while the last seven or so minutes of the video show the same class a week later having a discussion toward the end of class. There are 15 sophomore students ages 15 to 16 in the class, and all students are a part of the standard sophomore English course required of all students at the school. There are seven females students, three students of color, and one international student in the class. The course seeks to develop reading, writing, and thinking skills associated with literary analysis. These students have been together since the start of school year, and these recordings were made a week or so before the conclusion of the first semester. The students had been working on Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Again, the first part of the transcript captures an exchange where a student asked a question and the group (teacher and students) responded in answer. The latter part of the transcript accounts for the last part of a group discussion about the difference between themes and motifs.

In order to describe learning as a kind of performance, improv theory relies on Burke's dramatic pentad for framing each scene of learning with an eye toward talking about the learning as performed. The various elements the pentad may prove more or less useful depending on the scene of learning and the researchers' focus. Before arriving at the analysis of the scenes described above, I will reframe and redescribe them in the

context of Burke's pentad. The *act* captured in both sections of the transcript is the discussion of Hurston's novel. More specifically, the first scene offers a student question and subsequent responses as an act. The second scene involves the act of group literary discussion. The *scene* could be described as an independent, upper school, sophomore, English class. While not playing into the analysis below, the environment of this particular classroom would be another element of the scene. The *agents* in the scene would be a teacher and students. These agents could be described to greater and lesser extents depending on need. The *agency* in this scene arises from the shared text, shared space, and the other shared understandings the agents have in conducting the usual business of this particular class. The *purpose* of the scene is to conduct a conversation about a particular work of literature in way that enables students to learn and become better readers, writers, and thinkers. Sorting out these elements before undertaking the more specific description available through improv theory enables a researcher to have a starting frame of reference for understanding the scene as a performance.

For each category label (listening, affirming, playing), I use data from the transcript to provide an example of the thick description made possible by that particular piece of the theory. I separate out each category for the sake of clarity of the individual pieces. Ultimately, the quotes, the warm-ups, the exercises and activities as well as the classroom data could be switched between the three categories. Listening, affirming, and playing rely on one another conceptually within the theory. In using improv theory, I would not recommend making comments about one piece without commenting on the others. Again, I imagine these three labels as the three legs of a three-legged stool. You cannot use the theory without considering the interconnectedness of the three. Again, I

separate them here in order to clarify how each proves useful in describing a particular aspect of improvisation. The discourse analysis example concluding the dissertation will work at keeping the three pieces integrated.

Each of these three categories provides a home for the various and sundry aspects of improvisational theater's ethnotheory. I have grouped ideas into these three categories to provide as flexible an approach as possible when attempting to thickly describe the improvisation that takes place in scenes of learning. Within any given scene of learning, there may be specific aspects of the improvisational theater ethnotheory that might not apply when seeking to produce thick description of the scene. However, the three categories I take as the fundamental triad of improv theory represent groups of ideas that for any given scene of learning thick description can be produced that attends to these three areas. The order I have listed these categories is consistent with the order of improvisational operations necessary for perpetuating a scene. However, a researcher need not attend to his or her observations in any particular order. Quite the contrary, improv theory allows for a more holistic approach to describing the improvisation present in a scene of learning from numerous vantage points within the improvisational theater framework. To begin, *listening*, *affirming*, and *playing* serve as labels for a number of important concepts that can be observed and thickly described in a given scene of learning. The presence or absence of a given feature might be useful at times. At other times, the spectrum of presence or the degree of presence or absence might be worth observing. Improv theory and these three categories accommodate both.

One more overarching concept from the ethnotheory of improvisational theater ties these three labels together. Famously, Del Close, a recognized pioneer and

progenitor of improvisational theater ethnotheory, once said, “If we treat each other as if we are geniuses, poets and artists, we have a better chance of becoming that on-stage” (Del Close quoted in Halpern, 2005, epigraph). Listening, affirming, and playing all serve as the activities necessary for improvisers to live out this maxim on stage. While I think educators and education researchers could do worse than adopt this goal for their improvisation, I am not trying to impose a particular value to be hunted for or achieved using improv theory. Rather, I offer this complicated idea about the connection between identity and improvisation and the ways our embodied literacies of interaction impact learning as another kind of connective tissue that binds together the three categories. At the moment, I am not making the case for improv theory rendering value judgments about scenes of learning based on Close’s quote. Rather, I think this quote further engenders a more meaningful understanding of the ethnotheory from whence the three categories arise. Listening, affirming, and playing offer a way of describing improvised practice that could lead to a reflective practice that chooses to be more overt about the ways teachers and students might value one another as geniuses, poets, and artists.

Listening

Listening serves as a category for ideas both literal and figurative when thinking about the improvisation that takes place in a scene of learning. Literally, all of the participants in a scene must be listening to one another actively enough to be able to respond and support the ideas being presented by their fellow performers. Figuratively, listening refers to attention that gets paid in any number of ways. Another way to think about the listening required of an improvised scene would be to think about the need for focus. Individual and collective focus both serve to enable connections between

participants in the scene. These connections serve as the starting points from which the scene can progress. Listening and focus relate to the high level of attention that must be paid to every aspect of the scene. For instance, improvisers must pay attention to the pantomime they and their fellow performers create when building the environment of the scene. When one performer creates a table by pantomiming the setting down of a drink on said table, the rest of the ensemble needs to be "listening" to or attending to that imagined table's position so that no one walks through the established table and thereby destroying the environmental reality of the scene.

Listening is also fundamental to the improvisational theater principle of "yes-and." This principle will be discussed in each of the three categories due to its importance and complication. About listening and yes-and, Besser, Roberts, and Walsh (2013) write:

> When building a(n)...improv scene with someone else, there is nothing more important than **listening**. The beginning of the scene is built through Yes And, and you cannot Yes And something if you haven't heard it. It is important to listen because you are going to have to agree with and add to what you scene partner has just said...The start of the scene, like a basement, needs to be strong enough to support everything else that will be built upon it. Listening needs to happen so that you and your scene partner are on the same page about what *kind* of house you are building...None of this will be possible if you are not actively listening. A great improviser is a good listener. (p. 36)

Besser et al. attend primarily to the literal understanding of listening and highlight how listening (or not listening) enables (or disables) the opportunities for the improvisers to

yes-and one another. The yes-and principle suggests that in order to perpetuate the scene all improvisers must agree to affirm what they hear from one another while also adding something on to what is being built one brick at a time. The construction metaphor remains popular in improv training classes with students being reminded to listen so that they can bring their brick to the scene.

This conception of yes-and and the relationship between yes-and and listening further emphasizes the other facets of listening mentioned above. Again figuratively, listening as a form of attention and focus still applies to the concept of yes-and. Returning to the example of the imagined table, once a performer establishes an imagined table in the middle of the stage by placing an imagined drink on it, the rest of the ensemble will need to yes-and the presence of the table throughout the scene. Paying attention to all of the subtle actions and reactions of all the performers in a given scene is critical to the success of the improvisation in that scene. Even when it does not show up in the dialogue of the scene, a performer might "yes" the idea of the table by skirting around it when moving across the stage. Similarly, with affirmation of the table in place, a performer may decide the table is covered with a grungy, plastic cover based on listening carefully to what of scene members might be saying about the environment. Yes-and is critical to successful improvisational theater, and listening, focus, and attention, in all their forms, is critical to a successful yes-and.

Warm-up for Listening

Improvisers use warm-ups before a practice or performance for a variety of reasons. Depending on the warm-up, performers might be trying to bring their awareness to the present moment and to the people that will make up the ensemble of their

scene. Warm-ups can also be used to practice rudimentary improvisational skills, like listening, in a way that enhances that skill or simply reminds the ensemble of how important that skill will be in the upcoming improvisation. There are seemingly endless warm-ups geared toward cultivating and practicing listening or focus.

For example, "Pass the clap" serves as a common warm-up used by improvisers of all levels on all occasions (before, during, or after a class, a practice, or a performance). There are innumerable variations of all these warm-ups, but I offer McKnight and Scruggs' (2008) version below for its clarity as well as the thoughts about skill development:

> Pass the clap
> *Overview*: This exercise is often used as a warm-up and is excellent for building an ensemble. Students work together to pass a handclap around a circle.
> Instructions
> - Invite students to create a circle. Even in a large class, the entire group can participate in the exercise at the same time.
> - Instruct students that they will pass a clap around the circle.
> - Begin with two students: instruct them to face each other and clap at the same time.
> - The student on the left then turns and faces a new partner. Again, they clap at the same time.
> - Repeat clap until the clap has passed around the circle at least once.
>
> Tips
> - This is another game that is deceptively simple. If students are having trouble clapping simultaneously, try this demonstration: ask several pairs of students to face one another. Instruct them to look at each other's hands and clap. Then, instruct them to look into each other's eyes and clap. Almost always, looking into a partner's eyes is more effective.
> - Sometimes students, excited by the game, want to speed up the exercise. Especially as they are learning how to play, this can cause the game to get sloppy. Stop them, point out what's happening, and encourage them to slow down and work together. (p. 87-88)

I offer this warm-up as an example of an improvisational theater exercise that highlights the importance of listening. In particular, this warm-up creates the kind of figurative listening that more closely resembles focus or careful attention being paid to particular

aspects or people within a scene. Participants must listen to the rest of what is going on in the scene of the circle in order to be ready to take their turn passing. This scene cannot be created without everyone recognizing the role their listening plays in keeping the energy and the clap created by the group moving. Receiving and sending the clap is also a small act of yes-and, which further highlights the importance of listening as a prerequisite for making any move in a scene that resembles yes-and.

"Pass the Clap" also highlights the development of the kind of embodied literacy that illustrates the ways improv theory can make visible the improvised actions and words that individuals use to create their identities. This warm-up focuses on eye-contact and shared physical mirroring. The purpose of the exercise is to create focus and shared energy between members of the ensemble. The listening and focus associated with this exercise can be considered parallel to the kind of listening and focus necessary for teachers and students to share in learning. Understanding this exercise, an observer has the start of the conceptual framework to thickly describe the listening that goes on based on the ways teachers and students physically manifest or embody the energy and focus they are sharing in a particular scene of learning. This warm-up offers an inciting example of the ways improv theory provides concept and language for thickly describing an improvised interaction that might otherwise be difficult to notice and describe.

Listening Exercises

After a few warm-ups, many improvisational theater classes, practices, or pre-performance rituals lead to more complicated and involved exercises. Like the warm-up mentioned above, I believe these exercises further reveal the ways listening (in all the variations discussed so far) is important to improvised scenes. Further, understanding

these examples prepares the observer for noticing the embodied literacies inherent in improvised practice. Analyzing these warm-ups and exercises further grounds improv theory in the ethnotheory of improvisational theater. Famously, Viola Spolin has a series of exercises called "Give and Take" that build on one another working toward a number of improvisational theater principles. I offer this exercise as another example of listening as well as another illustration of how listening enables yes-and. Spolin (1963/1999) describes the following warm-up leading to a series of "Give and Take" exercises:

> Give and Take Warm-up
> Focus: on trying to move within the rules of the game.
> - Players stand in a circle. One (any) player may *take*; start a movement, and when any player takes, all of the players must *give*; hold their own movement, waiting to move. Any player can take (move) at any time, in the space of the circle, but must hold if another player starts a motion. Sounds may be considered taking.
>
> Points of observation:
> 1. Even a beginning group can play this game successfully.
> 2. Players sensing another player taking are said to be giving.
> 3. The word "hold" is used instead of "freeze." "Freeze" is total stoppage; "hold" is waiting to move as soon as one can do so. (p. 387)

This exercise evolves to become an even more complicated act of listening. Other iterations of the exercise involve two pairs of performers creating a scene while a second pair of performers is also creating a scene together (Spolin, 1963/1999, p. 149). These two pairs give and take as described above in an effort to move back and forth between their respective scenes. Eventually, without prompting, performers give and take focus while they carry on two disparate scenes on the same stage.

In order to be able to give and take focus, performers must be intently listening and attending to everything else that the other ensemble members are doing and not doing. Even in the first iteration where motion is the only performed facet of the scene, performers must listen and focus on everything that happens around them in order to be successfully engaged in such a complicated scene. The "Give and Take" series also

further highlights the ways listening enables yes-and. If a performer is moving, they must be listening for the moment when another performer decides to move. The initial moving performer will yes-and by giving the new mover focus in addition to being motionless. This listening and focus enables for the silent shift of focus from one performer to another and one scene to another.

Once again understanding this exercise and its multivalent purposes, I would suggest that observers of classroom practice can appreciate how being able to describe the literal and figurative give and take of classroom discussion, for example, would be tremendously helpful. In the context of this category of listening, an observer could again take note of the embodied literacies on display in the ways the improvised discussion between teacher and students is always layered with physical behaviors that reveal something about the way the scene is being improvised. Even with transcripts, a reader would be able to think and talk about how the language used by the participants in the scene manifests listening (or not) through the improvised give and take between participants.

Before using these concepts to describe the listening in a scene of learning, I offer one more exercise that requires performers to be listening to every aspect of the scene in order for the improvised scene to move forward productively. Lobman and Lundquist offer a robust version of the "Yes, and" Collective Story exercise that depends on high levels of listening and focus while also offering another example of how the category of listening connects with the yes-and principle. I continue to offer substantial sections of the descriptions of these exercises to further illustrate the different ways different writers

emphasize various aspects of the ethnotheory they are trying to share. Lobman and Lundquist (2007):

> "Yes, and" Collective Story-As we discussed in Chapter 2, "Yes, and" is the essential ingredient for building improvisation (and classroom) scenes.
> *Directions*-The class sits in a circle. The teacher explains that they are going to tell each other a story together. Each person will contribute one sentence and everyone (except the first person) will start their sentence with the words "Yes, and." The story should be told in the third person (avoid *I*, *me*, *we*, *us*), and the characters should be given names. The teacher solicits suggestions for a title from the class. The teacher then repeats the title and begins the story by saying the first sentence. The person to the teacher's right continues the story, starting his or her sentence with the words "Yes, and" and adding a sentence. The story proceeds with each consecutive person adding one sentence beginning with "Yes, and" to the story. Students should be encouraged not to try to move the story along too quickly or to steer it in their own direction, but instead to build gradually on what has been said. A successful story might not "go" very far but might still be very satisfying. The story ends whenever the teacher, or anyone in the class, feels it has reached a conclusion, or time has run out.
> *Hints*-
> - The first few times you do this activity the teacher should definitely say the first line. Model a good first line by making sure to include who the story is about, where it takes place, and a little bit of action. For example, "Johnny woke up, looked out his window, and began to cry."
> - Avoid using the names of people in the room.
> - This activity can be very challenging for students who want to shape the story or make a bold or silly offer. Consider stopping students when they do this and reminding them to attend to what was said previously. (p. 69)

The success of this improvised story relies on each member of the ensemble listening carefully to every detail of what has come before them in the story. In order to keep the story going, performers must literally say "Yes, and" while also making sure the content of the sentence avoids denying any of the ideas that were put forth previously by other members of the ensemble. Listening to and focusing on the ensemble and each ensemble member's contribution leads to the scene (or story in this case) being more successful. With these warm-ups and exercises in mind, the category of *listening* can be used to describe what happens in a scene of learning.

Thick Description with Listening

Observations about the listening that takes place in a scene of learning can be framed in a way that allows a researcher to account for the way the listening contributes to the improvised quality of a given scene of learning. This small piece of the transcript described above offers an example of the ways listening can be used to describe the improvisational character of the scene. This transcript comes from the first few minutes of a class period where students have been invited to ask questions of their reading from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

1. Ryan: No, no questions? Dynamite. What do you want to talk about? I'm ready.
2. John: I have one question real quick. I'm just gonna go in front of everybody. When they say "I god" what are they saying?
3. Da'marcus: Is it like "my god?"
4. Genevieve: I was wondering that too.
5. John: They just say "I god" and from like something like in the middle of a sentence they'll be like "I god, I'm going to town tomorrow" or something. I don't really...I'm not following.
6. Ryan: Can you show us one?
7. John: I'll look for one.
8. Ryan: That would be great.
9. Genevieve: I know what you're talking about.
10. Austin: Yeah, they're kind of all over the place. (Appendix A)

While all three categories of improvisation could be used to describe and characterize this ten-line passage, I will describe this brief scene in terms of the listening as outlined and expanded above. First, as a generalized form of coding, lines 3 and 7 offer examples of students improvising in response to the ideas that have come before them by literally listening to what has been said. The student in line 3 asks a question that depends on having listened to what the previous student has just said. This student listens to the initial question and poses a possible explanation with another question. Line 7 is a response to a question from me, the teacher, where the student had to be focused enough on the discussion developing to have heard the question in the first place. If the students speaking these two lines were not listening, were not focused on the task of answering the

initial question, they would not be able to keep the improvised dialogue moving forward. The improvisation of this conversation involves listening on this primary and practical level.

Where lines 3 and 7 required literal listening in order to be improvised, lines 4 and 9, spoken by the same student, required more than literal listening. These two lines involved paying attention to what other students in the scene were saying. These lines do not necessarily add information to the scene. Rather, these lines reflect the student's focus on the task at hand. This student improvises in the scene by offering lines that reflect her level of focus and attention. Similarly, line 10 requires listening and focus in order to respond in a way that creates a moment of yes-and. In the line 10, the student listens and attends to the conversation of the scene before adding her idea that she understands what the conversation is about and adds a comment that speaks to the prevalence of the difficult phrase in question. While still requiring the literal listening, lines 3, 7, and 10 indicate students who are improvising with the kind of listening that also entails attention and focus.

The listening evident in all of these examples highlights how critical listening can be when improvising in a scene of learning. Students, perhaps without being conscious of it, are playing a version of "Give and Take" in this brief exchange. One student initiates the scene with a question, and the other students give and take focus from one another in an effort to improvise a scene where that question gets answered. The giving and taking of focus requires listening and attention. This idea offers meaning making opportunities in both the improvised scene in the theater as well as the improvised scene of classroom. Again, I separate out the three categories for clarity's sake initially, but in

the next section I will discuss affirming while also allowing for the observations that need listening as well. The discussion of the third category will also necessitate considering all three. This progression will lead back to the final examples in the next chapter where no attempt will be made to artificially separate out the three categories.

Affirming

As just mentioned, the category of improvised activity that helps to notice affirming can hardly be separated out from listening. Where listening and focus can be isolated to certain extent as shown above, affirming necessitates at least some degree of listening for the affirmation to even be possible. Further, the yes-and principle can be further clarified with this second half of the formulation. Listening can lead to or enable the "yes," and the yes-and can describe moments where the listening has led to a moment in the scene where a participant listens, affirms, and in affirming adds something new to the scene at hand. As with the category of listening, affirming, as a category, entails a number of improv principles that might be thought of as adding something to a scene in a way that perpetuates the scene already underway.

Using the pantomimed table example from above, performers can listen and focus on their scene partners creating imaginary tables, and they can affirm that table by walking around it on the stage or placing some imaginary object on the table. This example also serves to further illustrate the "yes-and" idea where the performer figuratively "listens" to his or her partner creating the imagined table. Not walking through the table, thanks to this listening, is a "yes" to the reality of the table. The "and" would come when setting down a new imagined object or perhaps commenting on the ornate vase that is sitting on the table. Again, as we progress through these categories, I

aim to illustrate more and more how they are fairly inseparable when attempting to thickly describe the improvised quality of a particular scene. We notice a performer's listening, in part, through their ability to affirm the reality of the scene or something that has been said by another performer.

McKnight and Scruggs (2008) frame "yes, and" by writing, "The "yes, and" approach is the improvisational concept of agreeing with what a partner in a scene or exercise offers and building on that idea or suggestion" (p. 13). The idea of agreement is conceptually synonymous with affirming. I continue to use the gerund forms to highlight the ways these moments are active and fluid. Attending to the improvisation of a scene necessitates all of these concepts be framed as process oriented analytical tools. Affirming or agreeing both serve to describe the improvisation, and I prefer affirming in that it has a slightly more neutral connotation. Agreeing suggests that two participants are formally in positive agreement with one another. This oversimplification misses the point of yes-and. Within a given scene we must affirm the reality being created by the ensemble, but we might actually be in disagreement about how that reality should progress or how that reality means something different to different participants.

In an interview with Charna Halpern, a close partner of Del Close and writer of her own books on long-form improvisation, Salinsky and Frances-White ask a question about this difference between affirming and agreeing. Their question arises from a concern about whether or not agreeing to everything would lead to strange or boring scene work in improvisational theater. The interviewer and Halpern have the following exchange:

> Q: What do you do with a student if they're agreeing at the expense of drama? If one person tries to hold up a store and the other person says "Sure, take everything," and doesn't show any fear?
>
> A: Well, that's where people get it wrong. The agreement is not with the characters, it's with the actor. The agreement is not "Sure you can rob me, take everything." That's not agreeing. That's losing your integrity and not getting on with the scene. The agreement is with the actor and what the robber says. (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008, p. 355-356)

This exchange clarifies the point above about the difference between agreeing and affirming while also suggesting the level of nuance and complexity that improvisers bring to their work. This sort of conceptual exchange is remarkably common in improvisational theater. This relationship between performers in the scene affirming one another is directly applicable to the embodied relationship between participants in a scene of learning. Teacher and students must be affirming one another as participants in the scene even when they might be disagreeing or misunderstanding one another in the actual discussion being had at a given moment. The concept of affirming allows the observer to describe the underlying, tacit agreements and affirmations that make the improvisation of the scene possible in the first place.

This confusion about agreement leads me to the more neutral affirming category concept. However, the importance of agreement or affirming cannot be overstated, in the theater or the classroom. About the importance of affirmation and agreement, Halpern (1994) writes in her own book:

> A player knows that anything he says on stage will be immediately accepted by his fellow player, and treated as if it were the most scintillating idea ever offered to mankind. His partner then adds on to his idea, and moment by moment, the two of them have created a scene that neither of them had planned. *Agreement is the one rule that can never be broken*: the players must be in agreement to forward the action of the scene. When actor's meet on stage, they agree to accept each other's initiations; they must completely commit to the reality they create for each other without a moment's hesitation. (p. 47)

Agreement serves as another aspect of the affirming conceptual category. Novice actors and directors frequently misread this idea as only allowing scenes where every move is positive and happy and arguments or disagreements must never arise. As she clarifies in the interview quoted above, Halpern means to suggest that for any scene to be perpetuated the performers must affirm the choice they make as an ensemble about the world they are creating in the scene even when the characters they are playing might seek to negate one another in some form or fashion. A parallel sort of observation can be made when analyzing classroom practice when using improv theory.

Besser et al. further distinguish and clarify these parts of yes-and in a way that highlights the more neutral understanding I believe to be most useful in thickly describing the improvisation in scenes of learning where affirming happens. Besser et al. (2013) define:

> Yes And. These two simple words are the building blocks of every...improv scene. "Yes" refers to the idea that you should be agreeing with any information your scene partner gives you about your reality. "And" refers to the adding of

> new information that relates to the previous information. Yes And is very important at the beginning of every scene, since it will allow you and your scene partner to discover the base reality in which your characters exist. (p. 12)

Due to their particular philosophy regarding improvised scenes, Besser et al. emphasize yes-and at the beginning of scenes before they shift their emphasis to doing whatever is necessary to play the game of the scene. This shift in focus may apply to the description of classroom practice depending on the scene. However, for the purposes of this initial theory development, the affirming moves falling under the yes-and umbrella should be available to describe moments throughout the scene of learning.

More specifically about agreement, and so about the category of affirming in this theoretical framework, Besser et al. (2013) suggest:

> In order to create a...scene with another improviser, the very first thing you must do is come to an agreement with each other about the basic context of the scenes you are performing. Imagine that you are going to dance with someone. Are you going to waltz or salsa? You would be able to tell almost immediately from the first action your dance partner takes. Joining in with this first choice (whether it is waltz or salsa) may seem very obvious and simple, but it is undoubtedly essential if the dancing is to happen at all. A failure to come to a basic agreement about the context of the scene stops a scene from succeeding before it even starts. (p. 17)

This more focused definition of agreement highlights how and why the improvisers must be committed to moves that affirm. The scene cannot get started, much less progress, if they performers do not yes-and one another in a way that allows the reality of the scene

to be perpetuated between all those ensemble members who happen to be in the scene. While all of these writers (McKnight and Scruggs, Halpern, Besser et al., and Spolin (in a moment)) make these statements in a prescriptive way, I aim to use these ideas to develop understanding of the category of improvisational theater ideas under the label "affirming." I have no intention of being prescriptive in the context of improv theory. I do tend to think that good scenes of improvisation follow these principles prescriptively (whether on stage or in the classroom). However, the purpose of the theory is to create a highly developed way of thinking about and observing (describing) improvisation in scenes of learning. There are most certainly scenes of learning where yes-and would be hard to observe. However, observing that absence would still be valuable in terms of the improvisation happening (or not) in that scene.

Before discussing a warm-up and an exercise that cultivate affirming, I offer one more articulation of the concept by looking at the way Spolin expands the idea of agreement to encapsulate the entire ensemble. When Spolin discusses agreement, she almost always characterizes agreement as an aspect of the relationship between all members in the ensemble. She defines "group agreement" as "Group decision; agreed reality between players; agreed reality between players and audience; acceptance of the rules of the game; group agreement on focus; we cannot "play" without group agreement; breaks tie to teacher-director" (p. 360). Much of this definition echoes the sentiments from the other improvisers quoted here. Yet, I think the focus on the "group" or ensemble is important. Affirming takes place between individuals as they exchange actions and dialogue in a scene. Furthermore, affirming takes place between the entire ensemble and arises from the amalgam of all the words and actions that get expressed or

withheld throughout any scene that happens to be improvised. This more holistic understanding of affirming and agreement better suits the needs of making meaning out of observations from classroom practice considering the classroom scene typically involves the entire ensemble or large portions of the ensemble all at once.

Warm-up for Affirming

To better understand affirming as a part of improv theory, I offer a classic warm-up exercise that groups use in an effort to create moment to moment agreement while also building a strong sense of everyone affirming everyone else. Again, numerous writers detail this warm-up, but Halpern's explanation includes thinking that reveals more about the importance of affirming within a scene. Halpern (1994) explains "Hot Spot":

> The Hot Spot demonstrates how easy it is to make connections...it also teaches the absolute necessity of players supporting each other. Students quickly learn that the game is more important than its individual players; egos have to be sacrificed for the good of the game. The greater the trust, the faster and funnier the game...The players gather on stage in a loose half-circle around an imaginary "hot spot," located down stage center. The group must create a musical pattern of ideas, using lines from real songs, inspired by a previous scene or the general theme of the piece. To do this, one person stands firmly on the hot spot. He has the "spotlight," and must begin a song, singing loudly and confidently. Before he can finish the second line, however, another player literally pushes him off of the hot spot. The new player loudly and confidently begins singing a different song that has been inspired by the one he has just heard. He is immediately interrupted by a third player, who knocks *him* off the hot spot and begins singing another song, similar in theme. This continues at a fast pace...Each of the players is responsible for keeping the game moving at a very fast pace by pushing each other off the hot spot as soon as the idea has been conveyed. (p. 40)

Hot Spot necessitates the ensemble focusing and listening to what each participant brings to the Hot Spot. By moving the spotlighted player off, the next player has listened to the song that came before. The new player yes-and's that initial song by offering a new one inspired by the previous song. This move to keep saving whoever happens to be on the Hot Spot also suggests how players affirm one another by acknowledging that being on

the spot is tough. The ensemble works together to affirm individual members rapidly enough to avoid having any one player remain on the Hot Spot for too long. Like Spolin's focus on group agreement, this warm-up demands that entire group be invested in affirming every other member of the group knowing that when an individual is on the Hot Spot he or she can count on the group to move him or her off quickly. As such, the affirming category of ideas in improv theory acknowledges both the individual moments of affirmation where just a few individuals are corresponding as well as the collective affirming of the entire group cultivating a sense of overarching affirmation.

Hot Spot, like the other warm-ups and exercises, mentioned makes the group conscious of the ways the improvisation of a scene unfolds. When observing classroom practice, the concept of affirming allows an observer to note the ways participants tend to behave in response to the various offers brought forth by other participants. Noticing a particular class discussion is quiet or not may not lead to much fruitful analysis. However, improv theory enables observations about who is "quiet" and how that "quiet" manifests itself in the ways a particular participant or ensemble improvises by affirming or not affirming the offers being brought to bear on the scene. Hot Spot is a physical embodiment of the awkwardness of an individual participant taking on too much to keep a scene or discussion going. The concept of affirming allows an observer to critically consider a scene of learning that could describe the manifest behaviors of participants in the context of whether or not that particular individual seemed willing to be on the "hot spot" or to make sure someone else got off the "hot spot." Again, a simple warm-up, but one that makes visible the ways improvised activity arises from the embodied responses of participants.

Exercise for Affirming

The Hot Spot warm-up highlights the ideas of affirming necessary for cultivating worthwhile improvisational theater scenes. The Ad Game is an example of a game or exercise that further relies on the participants' ability to affirm the choices made by individuals and the ensemble as a whole. McKnight and Scruggs (2008) describe the Ad Game:

> Ad Game
> *Overview*: In small groups, students act as a creative team working to advertise a new product. Skills are developed in oral communication, team building, self-confidence, critical and creative problem solving, and idea generation.
> - Divide students into groups of five or eight.
> - Send one group to the playing area to form a back line.
> - Ask the audience for a suggestion for "a new product--something no one has seen before!"
> - Tell the players that they are now an advertising team, and it is their job to describe this product and inform the public about how great it is.
> - Players build on everything that is said by beginning each sentence with "Yes! And…"
>
> Tips
> - Have students brainstorm a list of several new products before you start. Then you won't have to pause in between exercises waiting for new suggestions; you can read them from your list.
> - All ideas are accepted and built on.
> - "Yes, and…" is at the core of all improvisation and is a powerful tool for creating an environment that is conducive to cooperative learning. (p. 48-49)

The Ad Game offers performers the chance to build something entirely unique as an ensemble. The outcome of this game depends on the degree to which the performers can make affirming moves, like yes-and, that will build the product and its marketing one piece at a time. The listening and focus entailed in this exercise have to be in place for any affirming to occur. The conceptual framework of this game allows for a more concentrated understanding of affirming and the way the presence of affirming moves builds while the absence of affirming moves creates a stilted or stopped game.

Like Hot Spot, the Ad Game parallels particular kinds of moments in classroom practice. Being able to thickly describe the affirming qualities of particular choices and actions in a scene allows an observer to consider how the improvisation in a scene of learning is working toward building something collectively as an ensemble. Further, understanding this game and its concepts enables the observer to consider how an ensemble embodies the various collective literacies of the group to function as a group in the process of learning.

Thick Description with Affirming

Again, without being prescriptive, I return to a different brief exchange from the same transcript above that highlights moments where affirming is present or absent by varying degrees. The students are still sorting out the initial question about the phrase "I god." They bring that scene to a close as follows:

1. Da'marcus: I think it means like "my God."
2. Genevieve: Yeah, I was thinking like, yeah, like "My god."
3. Liliah: It means like "oh my goodness."
4. (laughing)
5. Cameron: I saw that too.
6. Genevieve: I don't think that works in every...
7. John: "I god almighty" so...
8. Ryan: Well what page? What page?
9. John: Uh, 78.
10. Ryan: Page 78.
11. Thibault: Where? Like at the bottom.
12. Da'marcus: Right in the middle.
13. Ryan: "I god almighty" Yeah, I think it's an exclamation. Like Oh my gosh good grief like whatever your favorite...
14. Da'marcus: I think it's like "*I God*" [in a higher, animated voice]
15. John: I've just never heard someone say that.
16. Da'marcus: (laughing) That's how I say it...
17. Ryan: That's exactly how Da'marcus says it...
18. Da'marcus: I do voices at home…when I'm in my room
19. Ryan: I'll bet you do.
20. Da'marcus: That's the only way I can get through it.
21. Ryan: Yeah, I think that's the best way to get through it... (Appendix A)

As previously suggested, there are a number of specific lines or offers in this transcript that could be described as moments where students are listening to or attending to or focused on the contributions of other students in the scene. While useful, I will try to keep my thick description and analysis of this passage focused on those moments of listening that explicitly lead to affirming. Overall, the listening and affirming moments in this scene are prevalent. The improvisation within this scene would be described as having numerous moments where participants listen to one another and continue the scene or perpetuate the improvisation by affirming.

More specifically, as students begin to improvise their way toward an answer to the initial question about "I god," there are a number of lines that affirm the listening that has taken place by reiterating the possible answer the ensemble seems to be favoring. Lines 2 and 5 show students improvising in a way that says "yes" to the possible answer, and they affirm without following through the entire yes-and move by not adding something on after the affirmative "yes." Perhaps these lines would be less appreciated on the improvisational theater stage, but in this scene of learning, the affirmation serves as another vote being cast for a particular answer. This improvised voting takes place throughout this scene, and lines 2 and 5 are particularly straightforward in terms of appreciating the way those improvised responses give evidence of listening and focus on the flow of the scene while also affirming that there is agreement or consensus being developed by the ensemble.

As the teacher, I try to draw the student's attention back to the specific example that might help them continue to think through whether their consensus answer makes sense in context. Line 8 shows listening to the conversation, but I would question the

degree to which this insistence on an example affirms and follows the yes-and model. Instead of saying, “yes, we’re on the right track I think, and let’s look at some examples to confirm”, I just ask for a page number and insist upon an example. I did not allow the scene to continue in a way that might have led the students themselves to considering examples to test their hypothesis. Even more so, at line 13, I confirm my agreement with the consensus answer without even bothering to discuss the example on page 78 that I aimed the students towards moments before. This teacherly stamp of approval “jerks the wheel” of the scene in the direction I want the class to go.

The strong improvisation between the students in this scene would suggest that the students were creating a rather positive scene on their own. Instead of allowing that to play out by listening and affirming with students, I chose to confirm a particular answer being pursued productively. As a result, this scene ends moments later when students realize I’ve given an answer instead of allowing them to continue to improvise their way toward one. Instead of allowing the scene to progress according to the goals of the ensemble, I all but end the conversation and move on by establishing my agreement with the consensus. Again, improv theory would not seek to put a specific value on any of the choices made by me or the students. However, reflecting as the teacher, I think I should have allowed the students to continue to follow the worthwhile improvised scene they were building on their own. I often seek to develop identities and literacies in students that allow them to come to their own conclusions and not rely on me for answers. However, in this scene, I improvise in such a way that I reinforce the idea that the teacher has the “right” answer. I even undermine the literacy and identity I want to create for students where they seek to use examples to justify their positions. I encourage

the students to follow the example to page 78, but I never follow that example. My improvised choices effectively end the scene. Retrospectively, I would have liked that scene to continue in a way that had students continuing to build their collective understanding and answer. Improv theory would allow me a way to think about the scene and how I could have kept making yes-and moves until the students had found their own way.

Instead, I almost start a new scene from line 16 to 21. Da'marcus had affected an accent to share his hearing of the phrase in question. I do a fine job of making yes-and moves to validate or affirm that student's approach to thinking through the vernacular out loud. Initially, I yes-and by joking with the student ("I'll bet you do"), and then I overtly suggest that reading the vernacular out loud is the best way to handle the complication of decoding the phrase. In terms of improv theory, I listen to and affirm this student's approach, and I encourage the identity and literacy of the reader who tries different tactics to develop understanding. And yet, this scene is still a departure from the scene already in progress. The one time I used my turn to effectively say, "Yes, and let's move on" I derailed the entire scene of learning. Again, improv theory has no interest in highlighting whether or not my choices were right or wrong. Rather, improv theory gives me a way to reflect on how my choices are improvised and the extent to which those improvised choices allowed the scene of learning to develop in a particular way or not. This group scene had great momentum with lots of ensemble affirming, and I think my choices as a teacher and improviser in this scene may have hindered the group's ability to continue improvising toward collective understanding and an answer to the initial question.

Playing

The final category of improv theory is *playing*. Listening can happen without much affirming and playing. Yet, without the affirming and playing, the listening does not perpetuate scenes of its own accord (on stage or in the classroom). Affirming requires some listening and enables improvisers to yes-and one another. However, affirming and listening do not always lead to playing within scenes. Playing almost always requires the participants to be listening and affirming in the ways I have detailed above. As I outlined at the beginning of the dissertation, playing is learning. In a way, the improvised play within a scene of learning is the point of all listening and affirming. Playing encapsulates a number of ideas about improvisation that further enable the education researcher and educator the chance to reflect on the improvisation of entire scenes of learning. Without playing, I would contend there is little to no learning.

In a book called *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, Nachmanovitch theorizes more generally about improvisation, including and beyond improvisational theater, and the way improvisation relates to play. Nachmanovitch (1990) proposes, "Improvisation, composition, writing, painting, theater, invention, all creative acts are forms of play, the starting place of creativity in the human growth cycle, and one of the great primal life functions. Without play, learning and evolution are impossible" (p. 42). With this opening in mind, I believe this final category within improv theory begins to work back toward thinking about improvisation as fundamental to understanding the ways students and teachers improvise in ensembles to create literacy and identity. Nachmanovitch aims to ruminate over the concepts of play and improvisation in a way that enables people to consider the ways they play and improvise within their given

scenes as artists and otherwise. Improv theory borrows a similar spirit in thinking about the concept of play (and deep play following Geertz) in a way that seeks to enable a more robust reflective practice. The playing category of improv theory should offer a means of developing thick description that helps researchers more carefully consider moments and whole scenes in terms of how those moments and scenes emerge from an improvised process.

In returning to concepts of literacy and identity, Nachmanovitch (1990) further highlights the profundity of play in the lives of humans:

> Play is always a matter of context. It is not what we do, but how we do it. Play cannot be defined, because in play all definitions slither, dance, combine, break apart, and recombine. The mood of play can be impish or supremely solemn. When the most challenging labors are undertaken from the joyous work spirit, they are play. In play we manifest fresh, interactive ways of relating with people, animals, things, ideas, images, ourselves. It flies in the face of social hierarchies. We toss together elements that were formerly separate. Our actions taken on novel sequences. To play is to free ourselves from arbitrary restrictions and expand our field of action. Our play fosters richness of response and adaptive flexibility. This is the evolutionary value of play--play makes us flexible. By reinterpreting reality and begetting novelty, we keep from becoming rigid. Play enables us to rearrange our capacities and our very identity so that they can be used in unforeseen ways. (p. 43)

Gayanumaya's wall-climbing described in Chapter 2 can be more fully understood by thinking about the ways her improvisation entailed these qualities of play. Improv

theory's capacity for understanding scenes of learning as play enables an analysis of learning that respects the stakes for teachers and students who engage in deep play when they co-construct scenes of learning. As will be explored in the final chapter of this dissertation, an understanding of how power gets improvised within scenes of learning relies on considering the ways the improvisation of power needs to be understood as a kind of play in the way Nachmanovitch suggests above.

Another way to complicate the idea of play and playing is to consider another outcome of playing in the field of improvisational theater. The concept of "group mind" gets described in most of the works of improvisational theater already discussed. Group mind names a process and a product of improvisation wherein an ensemble improvises in a way that creates scenes that seem to be more than the sum of their parts. Group mind seems to create scenes that appear impossible to improvise. In discussing "group mind," Halpern (1994) writes:

> After an improviser learns to trust and follow his own inner voice, he begins to do the same with his fellow players' inner voices. Once he puts his own ego out of the way, he stops judging the ideas of others--instead he considers them brilliant, and eagerly follows them! This is why there is no such thing as a "bad idea" in improv. Players take each other's ideas--no matter what they are--and make them work...One person's idea becomes the collective idea of the group, and is therefore played brilliantly...When a team of improvisers pays close attention to each other, hearing and remembering everything, and respecting all that they hear, a group mind forms. The goal of this phenomenon is to connect the information created out of group ideas. (p. 92)

Group mind is the process and product of an ensemble listening, affirming, and playing scenes in a way that allows for everyone to yes-and their way to scenes that maximize the group's potential to explore and create ideas. Similarly, scenes of learning can engage ensembles of teachers and students in a state of play where each member of the ensemble creates and is created by the scene. This process of creation leads to the opportunity for new and novel literacy and identity.

I conclude this introduction to playing with another definition from Spolin (1963/1999), who situates the term in life and art as well:

> Playing: Fun, enjoyment, enthusiasm, trust; heightening the object; moving relations with fellow players; involvement with the focus; the physical expression of the life force; a term usable instead of rehearsal in improvisational theater. "Let's play!" (p. 365)

Playing is important to improv theory in that this final piece of the triad connects the other two in ways that reflect the complicated quality of improvisation within a scene. In order to cultivate thick description of improvisation, improv theory needs a way of describing a quality of the action that arises when participants are listening and affirming in all the various ways outlined above. Playing is distinct from the other two terms in that this category accounts for the ways improvisation happens when the listening and affirming qualities are in place. Playing enables thick description of a scene of learning where the presence, absence, or degree of play can used to reflect more carefully on how the learning gets improvised within that scene.

Warm-up for Playing

One of the most common improvisational theater warm-ups, and all its iterations, is called Zip, Zap, Zop. This warm-up can be utilized for attending to specific elements of listening, affirming, and playing. I use this warm-up as the final illustration in an effort to continue to acknowledge the interactive qualities of listening, affirming, and playing. McKnight and Scruggs (2008) outline Zip, Zap, Zop:

> ZIP, ZAP, ZOP
> *Overview*: In this fast-paced game of concentration, students pass energy and focus to each other. Skills are developed in listening, following directions, focus, and self-confidence.
>
> - Invite anywhere from six students up to the entire class to stand in a circle in the playing area.
> - The first time the game is played, ask all of the students to practice an "energy clap," in which they sweep one hand across the other and end up pointing their whole hand toward another player. Done correctly, this brush-clap will make a clapping sound.
> - Once they've mastered the energy clap, tell them to accompany each clap by saying "Zip" or "Zap" or "Zop."
> - Tell students that "zip zap zop" is a mutating ball of energy that will change every time it moves to another player, from zip to zap to zop and then back to zip again.
> - To begin the game, one student claps at someone and says "Zip." The receiver claps at someone else and says "Zap," and so forth.
>
> Tips
>
> - Eye contact is very important in this exercise. Remind students to make eye contact with each other before passing the energy.
> - Students enjoy playing elimination rounds; when someone drops the energy, he sits out. (p. 103-104)

Playing Zip, Zap, Zop (Z3) necessitates the group listening to and affirming one another. This warm-up elicits play as performers begin to get used to the pattern and experiment with variations of their opportunities for yes-and. For example, performers begin playing when they pass back and forth between the same two people for a few rounds or when the energy gets passed to a person immediately next to the person sending the energy. Performers also tend to begin playing with the ideas of how eye contact and the brush-clap can be altered while still continuing to play the warm-up.

Briefly, I used this warm-up with a group of kindergarten students who enjoyed themselves immensely as they began to alter the rules of play. This group of students was doing a superb job listening to and affirming one another as they passed the energy around their circle. At one point, a student who was ZAPed passed another ZAP to the next person. Instead of stopping play to declare the “mistake” of having two ZAPs in a row. The second person ZAPed passed a ZOP to a person who passed her energy along with a second ZOP (ZIP, ZAP, ZOP, ZIP, ZAP, ZAP, ZOP, ZOP, ZIP, ZIP…). Again, without stopping to discuss, the group mind built by these kindergartners changed the rules to yes-and the one child’s repetition of ZAP. The warm-up continued but with two of each element instead of one. Changing the pattern to create a novel solution in order to keep the warm-up going is a prime example of play and group mind.

Like the other two legs of improv theory, playing makes visible some of the otherwise difficult to describe qualities of learning as it gets improvised amongst an ensemble of teachers and students. Zip, Zap, Zop illustrates the ways play can arise even within rather structured learning, playing circumstances. Even within the structures, participants can embody various aspects of their own literacy and identity by yes-anding in a way that playfully alters the flow or energy of a particular scene. Improv theory and the concept of playing allows an observer to account for those moments when energy gets manifested as actions and words such that participants in the scene find themselves creating and created by that energy. Without improv theory, noticing and articulating something about that energy proves remarkably difficult.

Exercises for Playing

This kind of warm-up can be used to get students in the mood to play any number of more complicated and challenging exercises or games. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) describe a game of Invisible Kickball:

> Invisible Kickball-This exercise is an excellent test of your class's ability to channel their competitive impulses toward competing on behalf of the group. If well executed, onlookers will wonder if your class has gone completely mad.
> *Directions*-The entire class goes outside or to the gym, and is organized into teams for a game of kickball. They then begin playing the game, but with one twist--there's no ball. Students improvise the game, from start to finish, as they ordinarily would, using their imaginations to collectively create what happens.
> *Hints*-
> - A desire on behalf of one or the other team to subvert the imaginary aspect of the game in order to "win" will prove disastrous. Remind the students that although they're pretending to play a competitive game, they're actually engaged in an elaborate improv activity and that, as with all improv games, success depends on their competing on behalf of the group. Encourage students to fail (miss a catch, strike out) with great exuberance to add to the drama of the game.
> - Another familiar activity that ordinarily involves a ball can be substituted for kickball. (p. 174)

With Invisible Kickball, students are literally playing a game. However, they are also deeply engaged in improvising a complicated scene. In this exercise, students must move beyond the listening and affirming. They must use their ability to listen and affirm to play within the scene set up by the construct of kickball. Almost constantly, students are challenged to come up with novel solutions to the problem of everyone needing to imagine the kickball itself. Even more complicated, their needs to be enough listening and affirming to create the group mind necessary for everyone seeing and playing with the same invisible kickball all at the same time.

Here again, Invisible Kickball suggests something about the way the ensemble embodies literacies and identities that reflect the energy, feelings, and focus of the ensemble. When classroom practice involves abstract work like a discussion of concepts, there needs to be a way to consider how that practice gets improvised amongst

participants. Improv theory offers concepts and language that prove useful for describing and analyzing how an ensemble plays to create ideas and learning that were previously absent from the scene. The products of learning, like understanding, can be as difficult to notice and describe as an invisible kickball. However, improve theory provides a means of doing just that--making the invisible improvisation of a scene visible.

Thick Description with Playing

Thick description of the playing aspects of an improvised scene requires attention be paid to all three categories at once. None of these categories is more important than the others, and they are interrelated in different ways. The three-legged stool metaphor continues to apply. However, play is the most difficult to isolate from the other two. Rather than attempt isolation, I offer thick description and analysis of another scene of my own classroom practice as example to think about the ways playing (and its inherent complicated set of ideas from improvisational theater) can be a useful category for describing the improvisation in a scene of learning.

In this passage of the transcript, the same students who were discussing "I god" are now dealing with the problem of separating out themes and motifs. The class had been coming back to this conversation over the course of the class period, and this transcript provides the last few minutes of class and the conclusion of that conversation. I have shortened the long sections of teacher talk where I ceremoniously expound on the topic at hand. Additionally, I have excluded a few sections not directly referred in the thick description and analysis. The full transcript can be found in Appendix B:

1. Ryan: Uh, great so then like in the book what are some examples of themes and motifs? (Pause w/ audible yawn) We're making progress by the way without me saying anything. Good work.
2. Eleanor: Uh. Doesn't Janie like release her hair. When her hair's up that could be like a motif…the way she like
3. Austin: Yeah, she...
4. Eleanor: Or like puts it up that's a motif
5. Ryan: So what's the theme?
6. Eleanor: Uh, I don't know. I could go with...
7. Da'marcus: Freedom
8. Olive: I was gonna say freedom...
9. Eleanor: Freedom and that kind of thing and then the actual symbol would be her hair.
10. (incomprehensible)
11. Ryan: OK Sure. So you're agreeing with the tangibility thing that like the marriage is the actual act that shows up in the book and those acts in total stand in for a larger idea that's the theme.
12. Da'marcus: Get it. [responding to Charlotte's hand being up having looked up the definition of theme]
13. Charlotte: It says a theme is a subject or topic on which a person writes or speaks anything proposed as the subject of discussion or discourse.
14. Genevieve: I guess like one of…at the beginning we talked about how her like I don't know what the word is I guess like the hair like could be like the tree…the pear tree…that could be the motif (incomprehensible)
15. Ryan: Trees is the motif?
16. Genevieve: Yeah.
17. Ambrose: Cuz they do talk about the on like the back cover. They always talk about the great the giant tree. The thing we talked about that earlier. That's a good one.
18. Genevieve: Oh yeah…maybe it could
19. Ambrose: That would, that would
20. (incomprehensible)
21. Austin: I feel like the tree was a very reoccurring thing in each of the books. Like, Janie like finds like new trees to go under after like each town she moves to…
22. Ambrose: Could that be like, could that be like a new stage in her life?
23. Austin: Yeah
24. Ambrose: Like she's underneath the peach tree in the like chapter 2. When she thinks about when she thinks about like I guess the sex part
25. Genevieve: Oh was it peach tree? I said pear I think. Oops.
26. Ambrose: Oh, I have no idea.
27. Ryan: Pear tree.
28. Genevieve: Oh really, I was right. Yes!
29. Ambrose: And her (incomprehensible) changes there.
30. Austin: Yeah, like on page 77 she finds like a new tree and then she finds like blooming trees but (incomprehensible) 77 says all the time she herself set under a

shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes somebody near about making summer time

31. Genevieve: Then there was that quote that's on the back of the book…Janie saw life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered things enjoyed things done and undone…dawn and doom was in the branches…and there's tree branches on the cover
32. Da'marcus: There's a real tree on my book.
33. Eleanor: I feel like the tree is more like a symbol cuz it's like a physical object unless you're talking about like the growing of the tree, but I feel like the tree and then like sex would be the motif and the overarching theme would be like desire. That's just my (incomprehensible)
34. Ryan: What's the difference between a symbol and a motif?
35. Eleanor: Uh. The motif is like action or something's happening. I mean I feel like they kind of could be interchangeable.
36. Genevieve: Yeah, if we're talking about like symbols...
37. Ryan: I'm not sure if they're interchangeable, but I think they're very much interrelated particularly in the way that symbols and motifs relate back to a theme…so for example, I think I think I think your example is very nice it's very succinct...Um. Right. Like, it symbolizes her like this external thing is symbolizing some sort of internal state.
38. Genevieve: Is the tree also motif?
39. Ryan: Hang on let me finish this one…um so so um the theme again is something about freedom or um
40. Da'marcus: Slavery?
41. Ryan: Yeah, I think, I think, slavery. Like by in like slavery, not always in this book do we mean the history of slavery in the united states. We sometimes mean like bound, enslaved. Uh…working
42. Liliah: Entrapped?
43. Ryan: Entrapped. Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. It's not like like I think I think because both of the like both the history of slavery in American and entrapment because both of those are in this book, I would be careful I would be careful with the distinction between the two...Um I would suggest that a symbol is sometimes a symbol one time. Right? For it to be a motif, you kind of have to have it again.
44. Genevieve: (incomprehensible) a recurring symbol?
45. Ryan: Whereas a symbol like even if we had only seen the green light once in Gatsby, I think you could still make it a symbol...Um so, this becomes dramatically more complicated. Or can become dramatically more complicated. Does that make sense? Like, I think the hair example is a nice example.
46. Eleanor: Yeah, so wait if you're connecting to Gatsby green light you could like use as a motif, but then if you were taking an individual situation you could use it as a symbol.
47. Ryan: Right. So like so like, the green light is is is a symbol. If it's a symbol that I've seen multiple times throughout the novel which I do then I could argue it's a

motif. The theme that that motif contributes to is something like unfulfilled dreams, unreachable dreams, unfulfilled longing…something like that.

48. Eleanor: Okay.

My offer at the beginning of the scene hints at the kinds of literacy and identity I am hoping to cultivate in students during this conversation. I suggest the scene is proceeding nicely without my having to say much of anything. Indeed, prior to this closing exchange I had interjected little as students offered their various understanding of themes, motifs, and symbols. The encouragement I offer invites students into a scene where they will be allowed to continue developing their understanding. This improvised offer invites students into a scene of learning where there challenge is to continue developing their understanding with as little interference from the teacher as possible. Generally, I find students to be more apt to join in the genuine play and observation of a scene like this one.

In lines 2 through 11, a student makes an offer about an example (Janie's hair) that might help the ensemble to tease out the differences in the overarching terms the ensemble is trying to understand. The improvisation in this passage involves a number of offers and turn-taking where the example is listened to and affirmed as something the group is (a) willing to take up as a possibility and (b) a promising example that other students have considered as a part of their reading or our conversation. The students are playing within the context of the teacher's challenge to keep making progress without the help of the teacher. The tone of the improvisation here (the listening, affirming, and playing) is fairly solemn and serious as students seem invested in finding out whether they can use the example to increase their understanding of themes and motifs. In these lines, I continue to improvise in a way that is focused on listening and affirming through a simple question that adds only slightly to the direction of the scene.

In lines 14 to 24, another student offers a new example that parallels the first example in this passage enough to be considered as a yes-and of sorts. The students proceed to improvise their way through understanding this example about trees. I continue to listen and affirm with silence and a nudge of a question. Students continue to improvise seriously around the examples they are amassing, and they all seem focused on playing in a way that allows them to analyze their own ideas about the difficult, abstract concepts they have been asked to understand.

Interestingly, lines 12 and 13 offer a brief interjection when one student notices another student is ready to share information gathered from looking up one of the terms in the dictionary. The interjection is humorous, and the play here is a strong moment of improvisation for the group. There is a give and take of focus as the group (embodied in the young man who calls on the dictionary reader of his own accord) shifts momentarily to listen and affirm the contribution of the individual using the dictionary. Unlike later examples where I interrupt, this shift in focus seamlessly moves attention back and forth between the continued scene of group conversation and the interjected definition that adds food for thought to the discussion in progress. The students are all playing the game of shifting attention (Give and Take) in a way that honors the offers, the interjections, and the focused silence of most members of class.

Lines 25 through 34 start with a playful clarification about whether the tree in question is a pear tree or a peach tree. The correct student playfully celebrates her correctness without interrupting the flow of the conversation, and the student who was incorrect takes the celebration in stride. He still acknowledges with a kind of yes-and that he was wrong, and the class affords him the chance to continue despite the

error. The group mind of the class is playing in a way that recognizes the error in tree is not worth more disruption than the playful celebration. The scene continues with both students (peach and pear) feeling affirmed by the group while everyone recognizes there is still the challenge of understanding without teacher interference. In a way, this moment of celebrated clarification usurps the teacher's authority to make adjudications even though the final word on the matter seems to come from me.

Other than the clarification, I only contribute one question to this passage in an offer to have students clarifying their own terms. The question appears to the ensemble as a genuine question of clarification, and the group immediately proceeds with their improvised understanding with this slightly new direction in mind. In doing so, the group listens and affirms and plays in a way they have been prompted to play before. They look up a specific example. The group mind seems to recognize that there needs to be moves back and forth between abstract explanation and concrete example. In contrast to the earlier scene sorting out "I god," the students make their way to an example without my prompting. Even better, the group acknowledges and affirms the example, which carries them forward in the scene. This progress is in contrast to the earlier scene where my prompt and then neglect to use the example closes down the discussion.

The rest of the scene devolves into monologue. The dialogical became monological. I ask the clarifying question, but the scene that follows includes only minor interruptions that I either deny or ignore. The denial is especially egregious at lines 38 and 39. A student interjects to clarify, and I blatantly ignore the interjection despite the availability of numerous ways to yes-and the interjection into the flow of what I had in mind to say. I seem to have stopped affirming altogether, and there is nothing for me to

listen to because I have basically commandeered what was otherwise a perfectly reasonable scene of students playing at the game of developing understanding without much help from the teacher. I set up this game at the outset of the passage, but by the end of the scene there is almost no improvisation. Learning has ground to a halt because the playing has ended. Students have been made to be passive at this point, in part, because they are so committed to listening (or at least appearing to listen). Students were playing and learning when they were in the midst of their own conversation, and, in terms of improv theory, I stopped that learning in its tracks when I chose to stop listening, affirming, and playing with them as a part of their ensemble.

For each of the three categories of improv theory, I have tried to distill some essential features of improvisational theater through the writing, warm-ups, and exercises from that field. Further, I have made an initial application of these categories of description in observing and analyzing my own classroom practice. The thick description and analysis for each of the three categories offers an illustrative example of the ways improv theory could prove useful in helping education researchers and educators make meaning of the improvised processes inherent in scenes of learning.

I will conclude this initial theory-building project, and my dissertation, by re-reading data from the work of two other researchers invested in understanding literacy and identity while also describing and analyzing one more scene of learning from my own practice. In this last example from my own practice, I aim to demonstrate the utility of theory by melding it with various concepts borrowed from critical discourse analysis. These final examples will not be interrupted by my attempts to clarify aspects of the theory. Further, these sample analyses do not attempt to separate out the various

aspects of improv theory. Instead, this sample rests on all three legs of the stool at once. The purpose of these final examples will be to insinuate the utility of improv theory just enough to recommend further theory-building and application in an effort to better understand the improvisation that occurs in scenes of learning.

CHAPTER 5: IMPROV THEORY IN PRACTICE

"The essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not generalize across cases but to generalize within them" (Geertz, 1973, p. 25).

This final chapter offers two types of examples of improv theory being used to do the work of providing thick description of improvisation within various aspects of scenes learning. First, I offer two examples of the ways improv theory can be used to re-read scenes of learning that come from the data of previous research. Both Cazden's *Classroom Discourse* and Johnston's *Choice Words* offer a data set that has already been thoughtfully analyzed in terms of literacy and identity. I re-read the same data with the previous analysis in mind. Both re-readings involve the overlay of improv theory with the analysis already in place. I see the re-reading as an amplification of the prior analysis with the improv theory enabling greater attention being placed on the improvised quality of the data. The two examples included here are token examples, and improv theory has considerable application in taking a second look at data where thick description of improvisation might prove useful.

Second, I conclude this chapter using improv theory in concert with ideas borrowed from critical discourse analysis. A different kind of example compared to the re-readings, the second kind of example illustrates the utility of improv theory in its ability to be used alongside other analytical frameworks. This sample analysis takes

another moment from my own classroom practice and simultaneously highlights aspects of the improvisation while also using critical discourse analysis to show how power creates and is created through an improvised process. As mentioned, the purpose of the re-readings and this sample discourse analysis is to provide enough evidence of improv theory's applicability to recommend using the theory in future research examining improvisation, learning, and literacy.

Theory in Practice: Cazden's *Classroom Discourse*

Cazden's (2001) *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning* offers a thoroughly contextualized examination of teachers and students using language to establish identity and agency in their various scenes of learning. Cazden grounds her analysis in the observations she derives from scrutinizing transcripts of classroom practice. Cazden uses transcripts from one of her own classrooms in an effort to further embed herself in the classroom where she would be thinking about language she produced with her ensemble of students in the context of various scenes of learning. Cazden's discourse analysis offers a useful way of making observations about numerous aspects of classroom practice and the role those aspects play in shaping the ways teachers teach and students learn.

Cazden's book-length study serves as an examples of a robust, worthwhile study that, while complete, might be read afresh with improv theory in a way that leads to further insight. Cazden does a thoughtful job of moving back and forth between microscopic moments in transcripts where she values small moments of language use to build her understanding and macroscopic meaning where those individual bits of language coalesce as a particular experience of learning. Cazden's attention to detail

draws her into thinking and writing about the process of meaning-making that occurred in her classroom as much as the outcomes and meaning that teachers and students derived at the end of a particular class. This attention to process leads her to some thoughts about the ways learning is improvised.

Within a section titled "Structure and Improvisation," Cazden (2001) writes:

> Descriptions of human behavior require both searching for repeated patterns and acknowledging, even with admiration, the inevitable improvisation. The repeated patterns--which we call the *structure* of the event, or the *rules* that the participants seem to tacitly follow--can be formally analyzed. (p. 39)

This binary of structure and improvisation is reminiscent of Sawyer's (2011b) book title as well as the way he constructs the idea of understanding classroom practice as improvised. Cazden and Sawyer both juxtapose the patterned moments and the improvisations in a way that still seems to place emphasis on the improvisation itself as a noun. The improvisation is an outcome or product in this construction, as was the case with Holland et al. I acknowledge the importance and utility of thinking about the improvisation as final product, and I believe attending to the process that leads to that product is just as useful in terms of making meaning about classroom practice.

Cazden's quote emphasizes the patterns and the possibility (necessity) of formally analyzing "the repeated patterns." Even in the context of this structural analysis, I would argue that the patterns and rules are deployed through an improvised process. Cazden places a premium on those improvisations (like Gyanumaya's wall-climbing perhaps) that are admirable. I propose that equal attention could be paid to a wide range of improvised processes and products. Students and teachers do not need to be doing the

unusual wall-climbing kind of improvisation in order to be improvising. Improv theory offers a means of analyzing the improvisation of series of moments that are both remarkable and unremarkable for their improvisation.

Here again, like so many of the other sources cited up to this point, Cazden prioritizes analysis of the structure while doing little more than acknowledging the improvisation. In part, I would suspect that many of the works reread in this dissertation acknowledge improvisation, and not much more, precisely because of the dearth of theorizing about improvisation that would make the improvised process available for thick description and meaning-making.

Cazden continues to consider improvisation as she (2001) suggests:

> If we were trying to describe the competence of jazz musicians, for example, we would have to attend to both their knowledge of a musical system (a set of notes constituting a scale, and rules for combining them sequentially and simultaneously), and their ability to use that knowledge in creative ways at particular moments. (p.39)

Here Cazden thinks about improvisational music as a metaphor for the kind of improvised performance she examines in classrooms. She acknowledges both the structure and the improvisation here, but the rest of work stays persistently aimed at unpacking the ways the structures, rules, and repeated patterns of language play an important role in classroom practice. Again, I do not fault Cazden's approach as she ends up providing useful ways of understanding classroom discourse, but she does not live up to this idea of attending to both structure and improvisation as she suggests one would in order to better understand the jazz musician.

I am struck by this omission, or at least lacking attention to the process of improvisation, given some of Cazden's other thoughts about structure and improvisation. Her understanding of classroom practice theoretically serves as a legitimate starting point for deploying the improv theory I am developing here. I offer considerable material from Cazden precisely because she seems aligned with many of the preconditions I have established for understanding classroom practice in a way that lends itself to analysis of the practice as improvised. She continues to couch improvisation as metaphor, but I actually think she moves beyond the metaphor theoretically.

Cazden (2001) proposes:

> Like a group of musicians improvising together, speech events, including classroom discourse, can only be accomplished by the collaborative work of two or more persons...*school* is always a performance that must be constituted through the participation of a group of actors. Teacher and students may have different visions of how the performance should be performed, so the teacher assumes the dual role of stage director and chief actor. She may even consider herself the only "native speaker" in the classroom culture, yet she has to depend on "immigrant" students for help in enacting a culturally defined activity. (p. 40)

I would suggest that students and teachers in a classroom are not just *like* a collaborative ensemble of performers. Rather, students and teachers engaged in classroom practice are only learning when the participants *are* a collaborative ensemble of performers. Improv theory allows for understanding classroom practice as improvised without thinking metaphorically. The way Cazden talks about classroom practice here further insinuates her focus on structures and rules. Cazden seems to privilege the teacher's speech and

behaviors in this quote and throughout her study. While teachers are important, improv theory would consider the words and actions of each participant as worthy of scrutiny as equal, although different, members of the ensemble. All members of the ensemble bring visions and ideas, and improv theory enables an observer to account for all of those various visions and ideas as participants bring them at the outset of a scene. Further, improv theory can account for the way those visions and ideas evolve throughout the scene as the ensemble performs together.

Improv theory would also qualify Cazden's understanding of the need for at least two performers in scene of learning for there to be improvisation. Scenes in a theater often begin with one performer alone or doing and speaking by herself for some time at the outset of a scene. Like Gyanumaya, performers can find themselves in the midst of circumstances that require them to call upon prior sociocultural knowledge acted out through the identities and agency available to the performer at a given time. A student or teacher alone in a classroom may very well be improvising the start of a scene that will soon unfold as a scene carried forward by the ensemble. Improv theory does not depend on there being more than one person in the scene.

Cazden (2001) draws her brief discussion of improvisation and structure to a close by suggesting that:

> Descriptions of both the structure and the improvisational quality of traditional lessons not only sharpen our understanding of such events but also constitute a claim about the communicative competence of the participants--what it is a member knows in knowing how to participate. (p. 40)

Here again, I agree with Cazden's thought about the utility of observing both the structure and improvisation available for scrutiny in a scene of learning. I just do not find Cazden following through with much description of the improvisational quality she recognizes as valuable. Improv theory allows for a more robust commitment to observing the improvised quality Cazden writes about when thinking of how one might go about better understanding the "knowing how to participate" that classroom performer bring to their scene.

Cazden's discussion of improvisation and structure comes in the context of a chapter where she compares the discourse patterns of what she terms "traditional" and "non-traditional" lessons. Common patterns of discourse serves as the principal distinction Cazden's makes between these lesson types (for the purpose of this chapter's analysis at least). Cazden suggests that traditional lessons follow an Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern whereas the non-traditional lessons follow a pattern she suggests has been labeled as "inquiry" or "discourse-intensive" (2001, p. 30-31). Cazden's approach to this kind of analysis has remained in use since she proposed it in this work. Again, the emphasis, as discussed in her section on "Structure and Improvisation," is placed on the structures, rules, routines, and patterns.

I would argue that the data Cazden provides could be reread with improv theory in a way that accounts for how both are improvised. Further, improv theory can account for how the improvisation is different between the two models. Cazden highlights a number of differences and even begins to privilege some of the non-traditional lesson structures. Improv theory provides a way for understanding and, perhaps, justifying that privileging. Even without fully contextualizing each example within Burke's pentad, I

offer the following analysis as an example of the methodology being built with this improv theory.

One of the traditional lesson examples revolves around a lesson on families and birthplaces. Toward the end of the transcript, Cazden (2001) recounts the following exchange:

> Teacher: Uh, Prenda, who came, who came from a, who came farther: your mother from Arkansas to San Diego or your father from Baltimore to San Diego?
>
> Prenda: My father.
>
> Teacher: Yes, he came ah, he came a long, a long way. (p. 36)

This brief exchange follows the IRE pattern Cazden proposes as typical of traditional lessons. In terms of the improvisation, the teacher has been listening to the discussion and answers provided by Prenda. That listening allows the teacher to ask the initial question that seeks to have Prenda comparing distances on a map. The teacher affirms Prenda's earlier answer by including them in this question. The lesson is about distance but the teacher listens to and affirms Prenda by crafting her question about distance as a question about her family. There is a hint of play in this initial question. The question affirms the objective of the lesson as much if not more than it affirms Prenda's contributions to the scene. The lack of play arises from the initial, and limited, level of affirmation being afforded Prenda. Prenda is being asked a closed question that has a distinctive right and wrong set of responses that eliminates the possibility of play arising between the teacher and Prenda.

As such, Prenda's response is easily predictable for the teacher and uneventful for Prenda. Prenda had choices about the words she could use, but the meaning of those

words were under pressure to express a particular right answer. Prenda has clearly been listening to the teacher, and she affirms the question by responding to it in the prescribed, closed-off way that the question allowed. There is no play in Prenda's response because of the limitations being put on her response by the initial question. Ultimately, due to the fact that there is little play in this exchange, I would propose that there is little learning going on in this brief exchange.

The teacher's evaluative response is almost a moot point based on the restrictions placed on the scene by the way the teacher chose to focus more on affirming the purpose of the lesson and less on affirming the participants in the scene. The response serves only to suggest that "right" answer has been offered. Prenda's answer is affirmed, which necessitated the teacher listening. However, the affirmation is all but unnecessary because there is so little play inherent in this exchange. The exchange can be understood in the terms of improv theory (listening, affirming, and playing) even though there is little that is actually improvised.

The non-traditional lesson example can be understood with improv theory as well. Cazden includes an example from a math lesson. The following is an excerpt from that transcript:

> 1 Ellie: Um, well, there were a whole bunch of--a whole bunch of rules you could use, use, um, divided by two--And you could do um, minus one-half.
>
> 2 Lampert: And eight minus a half is?
>
> 3 Ellie: Four [*a gasp arose from the class*]
>
> 4 Lampert: You think that would be four. What does somebody else think? I started raising a question because a number of people have a different idea about

> that. So let's hear what your different ideas are, and see if you can take Ellie's position into consideration and try to let her know what your position is. Enoyat? (Cazden, 2001, p. 52)

The teacher, Lampert, has started a scene where he wants students to discuss their various approaches to a particularly difficult problem. Ellie's initial offer is an explanation of her way of dealing with the problem. The teacher listens to that answer and affirms with a question that accounts for that answer. The teacher knows the answer is wrong, but injects solemn (serious or deep) play into the scene by asking the question such that students have a chance to hear themselves thinking out loud instead of simply offering a correction. Ellie answers the question, listening and affirming what she's heard, and sticks to her method. The teacher reframes the question by suggesting that there are other students in the scene who saw the problem differently. Lampert has no idea who will speak next and what they will say. He trusts the ensemble with the opportunity to play. His reframing of the question affirms what is important to him about students being able to acknowledge and affirm what they have heard while adding their own ideas. This move of affirmation and addition is precisely what was discussed in the previous chapter as yes-and.

A number of students participate in the discussion that follows the reframing of the initial question. Lampert continues to listen and affirm while remaining open to the play that takes place as students try out different solutions to the problem as well as different approaches to helping their colleague, Ellie, understand where her thinking has gone astray. The students listen and affirm that what Ellie is doing could make sense while continuing to share their alternative approaches to the problem that avoid Ellie's

conceptual error. Lampert stays open and playful in his approach to cultivating a shared understanding amongst the ensemble, and his students take that cue to continue their own listening, affirming, and playing until such time as the scene moves forward with everyone partaking in the shared, ensemble understanding.

This sample analysis offers a sense of the ways scenes of classroom practice can be thickly described and understood in terms of the improvisation that takes place no matter the structures, routines, and rules that operate within that scene. Both the traditional and non-traditional lessons can be offered new ways of making meaning out of the transcripts when improv theory provides the framework for talking about how the individual offers of the various performers add up to the scene being examined. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of these two examples begins to suggest the ways that improv theory might prove adept at understanding why improvisation is a valuable element of learning. Placing value on the quality of improvisation, in the terms of improvisational theater, offers a starting point for justifying a preference for one kind of classroom scene over another. Both scenes discussed above are improvised to one extent or another. However, the improvisation leads to different kinds, qualities, and quantities of play. As such, I would argue the kind and degree of play helps us to understand the kind and degree of learning that arises in both instances as well.

More Theory in Practice: Johnston's *Choice Words*

Peter Johnston's *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning* provides another example of thoughtful research that benefits from the understandings that become available when improv theory informs the analysis. Johnston's book establishes a particular view of language that I share in this dissertation. I offer this

example as a means of further establishing my justification for using transcripts and critical discourse analysis as a place to start using improv theory in the final moments of this chapter. Here, I take one of Johnston's examples and think with him about why the language solicits particular kinds of behavior. Johnston offers reasonable explanations for valorizing particular constructions of language, and improv theory offers another way of describing and analyzing how language encourages particular kinds of effects.

Johnston starts out his book by situating the way he understands words and language as used in classroom scenes. He uses the example of adults interacting with babies and making communicative sense of their attempts at language. He then compares that interaction with those interactions of teachers and students. In thinking about how teachers order and choose their language, Johnston (2004) writes, "The teacher has to make something of what children say and do. She makes sense of herself, and offers a meaning to her students. She imputes intentions and offers possible worlds, positions, and identities" (p. 5). Although I might take issue with the privileging of the teacher in this articulation, I agree with this sentiment in general. I believe teachers and students must work collaboratively to build (and improvise) meaning with one another in scenes of learning. Johnston's approach at times seems a bit biased toward the teacher doing and saying things to the students as opposed to students doing and saying to teachers or better yet teachers and students doing and saying together. Still, I think Johnston has the right idea about how important language is for teachers and students. Improv theory offers a way of describing how and why language proves to be so important.

Johnston gives considerable attention to the way language creates and is created by the individuals using the language in the context of their group. Johnston (2004)

writes, “Language, then, is not merely *representational* (though it is that); it is also *constitutive*. It actually creates realities and invites identities” (p. 9). Johnston derives this understanding of language from J. L. Austin, who could be used to further ground the attention improv theory lends to the study of language. For now, I would highlight that Johnston seems to recognize the ways identity development, in the context of scenes of learning, arises from the progress of scenes and the language that gets exchanged between performer teachers and students in the scene. As with any scene in the theater or the classroom, the words used to communicate represent the ideas to be shared while simultaneously creating the identity of the particular character being enacted by a particular performer. Johnston’s book focuses on the ways this phenomenon can be understood in order to bring about the positive development of identities in students that are conducive to learning.

One more important observation Johnston makes about language and learning concerns the ways language and learning can be obscured or made invisible over time due to the everyday necessity of using language. Like breathing, language use becomes so common as to be unnoticeable except in those moments where circumstance necessitates awareness of what and how we are saying. Johnston (2004) suggests:

> We also learn things without naming them or even really being aware of them. Language is a perfect example. We acquire language, and by the time we arrive at school, we have remarkable facility with it. At the same time, we are largely unaware of it. (p. 12)

Johnston advocates a mindset that pays more attention to the way we use and get used by the language that surrounds us in scenes of learning. Similarly, improvisation becomes

such a commonplace activity in life that we hardly ever notice or even know how to notice the way we are improvising in the various scenes of our existence. Johnston's keen attention to language offers the opportunity to simultaneously pay close attention to the improvisational quality of the language exchange as it occurs in scenes of learning.

Johnston's book offers a wide range of language samples that indicate how to positively improve learning through the use of language conducive to mindsets that he advocates as important for learning in the first place. He offers some explanation of why saying certain words or phrases in certain ways tends to be helpful. Improv theory could provide another layer of thick description in an effort to better make meaning out of how and why particular examples of language tend to improve learning. Improv theory can offer analysis of how Johnston's examples perpetuate the improvised quality of the scene instead of closing it down. Specific aspects of improv theory can be applied to better understanding how Johnston's examples prove to be constructive in their application. The further utility of applying improv theory to Johnston's examples lies in the way improv theory can make useful generalization of his specific examples. Improv theory uncovers the fundamental theories that undergird the particular word and phrase choices he finds so helpful.

For example, Johnston offers an example of a child attempting to spell the word "farm." When prompted to spell the word, the child writes, "fo." Johnston (2004) proposes that a constructive response to the offer being made by the child would be, "I see you know how to spell the beginning of that word" (p. 13). Citing Clay (1993), Johnston posits that this statement attends to the "partially correct" nature of the

statement. He suggests the utility of this response to the child's answer arises from the attention paid to what is going well in this scene. Johnston writes:

> Focusing on the positive is hardly a new idea. It is just hard to remember to do it sometimes, particularly when the child's response is nowhere near what you expected. Indeed, the more we rely on expectations and standards, the hard it is to focus on what is going well. (p. 13)

I agree with all of Johnston's sentiments in this passage. His suggestion provides a way for a teacher to respond to a student in a way that validates and keeps the scene going. With improv theory in hand, even more meaning can be derived from this brief scene of learning in a way that might make cross-applicability easier. That is, improv theory can provide thick description of this exchange in a way that offers the underlying values that could be reiterated and practiced in such a way that the difficulty of remembering to interact in this mode would be easier.

Leaving aside Burke's pentad for situating the elements of this scene for the time being, I would suggest the improv theory triad of listening, affirming, and playing could provide even more meaning making opportunities for a researcher, teacher, and student. Johnston seems to invent the dialogue of this scene, which I further imagine as follows:

> Teacher: Could you please spell the word "farm" for me?
>
> Student: [Pauses] Okay. [Writes two letters "f" and "o"]
>
> Teacher: I see you know how to spell the beginning of the word. (Johnston, 2004, p. 13)

Even with only three lines of the scene, improv theory highlights the ways both performers are listening (or more broadly attending) to one another in the scene. The teacher asks a question, and the student responds affirming she has heard the request before writing down her answer "fo." The student affirms her participation in the activity by attempting to fulfill the request of her scene partner. The student's offer of "fo" (which we will assume is her best guess) is an example of playing in that she demonstrates her understanding of the structures that dictate she provide a written response in this context (perhaps signaled by paper and pencil being used as tools in the scene). The student plays the "spelling game" with her scene partner by listening to the request, affirming that she has heard and understood, and plays in the scene by offering a response.

The last move of this three line scene is where Johnston pays close attention. The teacher's response confirms that she was listening (again, attending might be a useful expansion of the term and its ideas in this case) or reading the student's response. Have received the "fo" offer from the student, the teacher affirms what is "partially correct" about the offer and leaves an opening to continue the scene with an opportunity for the student to learn how to spell the rest of the word. This impetus to keep the scene going can be understood as the teacher's act of play. The teacher plays by making an offer in response to the "fo" that keeps the scene moving. Saying "no" outright would close this iteration of the scene, which would curtail whatever momentum (and learning) the scene had going for it before being closed down.

In terms of improv theory, the teacher chooses to yes-and her student. Fundamental to improvisational theater is the choice to always explicitly or

implicitly yes-and the offers being made by other performers in the scene. The teacher's implied "yes" is her choice to focus on the "partially correct" aspect of the child's answer. The "and" implied by the teacher's statement is the possibility of considering other parts of the word's spelling that the teacher and child could attend to next as their scene moves forward. Again, saying "no, that's not how you spell 'farm'" would have closed the scene. The teacher's next offer would be the start of a new scene where the performers have to start again building momentum and using language to build understanding together.

In short, Johnston advocates for the use of this example statement as a means of encouraging what the student got "right." Right or wrong, improv theory would describe this brief exchange as a series of offers and responses that builds openings towards new possibilities instead of closing off avenues of where the scene might go from here. Improv theory offers a way of thickly describing the action and language of the scene in a way that robustly articulates an explanation for how and why this scene has the potential to keep moving toward more learning. Concerning opportunity for more learning, Johnston writes about using what's positive about the student's response to perpetuate learning. Without naming it as such, Johnston (2004) describes a version of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):

> Certainly, teaching to normative expectations will mean lots of positive feedback for some students (but not necessarily any new learning) and lots of negative feedback for others. Much more important is noticing--and helping the students notice--what they are doing well, particularly the leading edge of what is going well. This leading edge is where the student has reached beyond herself,

> stretching what she knows just beyond its limit, producing something that is partly correct. This is the launching pad for new learning. (p. 13)

Again, improv theory would suggest that this move allows the scene to move forward. The leading edge Johnston describes is the ZPD where students are on the boundary of the scenes they can have on their own and the scenes of learning they can have in an ensemble of students and teachers helping one another move forward in the scene. By using a yes-and move, the teacher and student can continue to build new understanding and learning with one another indefinitely.

Improv theory allows for the description and analysis of this brief scene to talk about how this moment is more than pointing out what is "partially correct." Improv theory manages to suggest something about how pointing to what's partially correct is indicative of the larger move of yes-and that enables a scene of learning to be carried forward to the next opportunity for developing new learning. Improv theory also provides a way of understanding of how this student makes progress toward a more literate identity she can deploy in other scenes once she has enough experience in scenes like this one. A student who has been exposed to more yes-and moments and fewer "no-but" moments is more likely to yes-and her opportunities for learning. Improv theory can thickly describe the ways this scene impacts the child's identity as a learner and performer, more generally, in all her scenes of learning.

With Cazden and Johnston in mind, the discussion of improv theory can proceed with a different kind of illustrative example. Both of these rereadings conclude this section in a way that suggests the possibilities for application available when a researcher considers the improvisational quality of scenes of learning. The final example of this

chapter provides an even more complete application of improv theory. This articulation continues to arise from examples of scenes of learning where I apply improv theory to highlight its detailed use and utility. Like the examples offered in previous chapters, I use Cazden and Johnston as invitations (offers) to a scene of research that wholly focuses on the ways literacy and identity develop through the improvisation of teacher-student ensembles in scenes of learning.

Further, in the next, and last example, I propose that the focus on improvisation, learning, and literacy provides an opportunity to consider the ways power gets negotiated throughout the ensemble while learning takes place. The above re-readings do not explicitly engage in critical discourse analysis while the final example offers the most complicated and sophisticated deployment of improv theory in order to provide the thick description necessary to make meaning of a scene of learning in terms of literacy, identity, and power.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Improv Theory

To reiterate, the purpose of my analysis in this example is to further develop a theory that helps to observe and analyze the improvisational quality of classroom practice within scenes of literacy learning. I believe classroom practices unfolding in scenes of literacy learning count as discourse. The texts produced in these scenes can arise from the transcription of words and actions of the participants in the scene as well as the visual and verbal texts found and used in the scene. In particular, I am interested in the ways teachers and students use language to create and negotiate power within their particular scenes of literacy learning that arise from the various Discourses available to those individuals. Throughout this project, I have attempted to theorize a means of studying

the improvised discourse of scenes of literacy learning that enables us to better comprehend the ways individuals improvise literacy and identity, and thereby their agency, within the Discourse.

In this way, I believe discourse is improvised. That is, I assume improvisation is a quality of discourse. At the least, even the most practiced, patterned, and scripted discourse manifests from one moment to the next through an improvised process. We do not know what we are going to say and how we are going to say it until we say it. As such, I believe an additional building tool (in the sense of Gee's building tasks and tools) could be proposed that aims to unpack the improvised qualities of discourse. Further, I believe that discourse and Critical Discourse Analysis provide the data set and tools for examining improvisation in the context of the various scenes where discourse occurs. In particular, I believe Critical Discourse Analysis provides a point of contact for further developing an improv theory capable of better apprehending how individuals improvise their literacy and identity within scenes of literacy learning in a way that has implications for the various power dynamics inherent in those same scenes.

My understanding of discourse, Discourse, and improvisation arises from a constructivist epistemology. Groups of people construct meaning through the discourse and Discourses they share in their interactions with one another. This process of constructing meaning within a group always must entail the complicated negotiations of power. These groups of people sharing a scene are similar to the groups of people improvising in the theater, but a theater group consciously improvising might be called an ensemble. Typically, ensembles operate within the constructivist epistemology recognizing that they can only build meaning through the shared scenes they produce for

the audience. The self-reflective nature of improvising ensembles offers an interesting sort of example for thinking about the analysis of various kinds of discourse and power. The improvisational theater community, with all of its ensembles forming a larger sort of ensemble, has some loosely agreed upon ideas about how best to go about improvising and thinking about improvisation. These ideas, and the underlying epistemology shared by these ensembles, has been transposed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation in an effort to think about the discourse found within scenes of literacy learning. This example aims to be a final (for now) example and effort in applying that transposition.

For the purposes of this example, I will further ground my understanding of Critical Discourse Analysis in the work of Gee and Fairclough. I am utilizing Gee as a construct for looking at my data on the microscopic level of language and discourse turn-taking. Gee's building tasks provide a worthwhile starting point for discussing improvisation, discourse, and power in the way Burke's pentad offers a place to begin characterizing the performative qualities of a scene. Using improv theory, in some ways, is akin to adding a building task especially interested in the improvisation of a discourse. Fairclough offers me a means of thinking about the macroscopic implications of my data and the ways small moments of discourse reflect and inflect larger issues and concerns. Again, Fairclough's approach complements nicely the holistic, process-oriented articulation that is central to improv theory. I hope to meld these two approaches by adopting the complimentary stances regarding the micro (Gee) and macro (Fairclough) discourse elements in order to suggest ways in which improvisation has implications for both the macro and micro concerns of Critical Discourse Analysis.

In some ways, I am proposing a new building task for Gee and a quality to describe social and discursive practices for Fairclough. When introducing his concept of building tasks, Gee (2006) writes, "We continually and actively build and rebuild our worlds not just through language but through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing, feeling, and believing" (p. 10). In actively building worlds, participants improvise in the scenes where their discourse gets created and creates. Discourse is often improvised. Improvisation is one more way we can talk about discourse and Discourses. An improv theory grafted onto CDA offers another vantage point for analysis of how participants create and are created by the scenes they share and the power inherent in those scenes.

Improvisation and Discourse also connect to the ways we go about forming our identities through the various improvised moments of discourse. Improvisation offers another way of understanding how these identities arise within Discourse and have implications for the way power is used, distributed, and accumulated. Fairclough (2010) proposes:

> A primary focus of CDA is on the effect of power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs, and in particular on discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities: on dialectical relations between discourse and power, and their effects on other relations within the social process and their elements. (p. 8)

Scenes unfolding between members of an improvisational theater ensemble always involve power relations and inequalities (Spolin, 1963/1999). Ensembles have specific

ideas about how to analyze and reflect on these aspects of their scene work. Similarly, I believe CDA would benefit from a way of talking about the improvised aspects of discourse in an effort to reflect anew on issues of power and inequality.

I see both of these quotes hinting at points of departure for making use of improv theory to understand a different aspect or quality of discourse. Further, these quotes reflect the fundamental way I am attempting to use these thinkers and their respective methods and theories. Gee focuses on the materiality of discourse while offering tasks and tools for building an analysis from the minute pieces of the text. Fairclough hones in on the ways CDA can be used to think about the broadest issues in discursive and social spheres while recognizing the dialectical relationship between the various components of a communicative event.

Just before arriving at the actual analysis, I want to articulate precisely the elements of Fairclough and Gee I plan to utilize as well as the elements of improv theory at work in this sample analysis. I am using “Figure 3.1” (p. 68) from Jørgensen and Philips (2002) chapter on Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis, which shows three nested boxes with “text” as the central box surrounded by another enclosed box labeled “discursive practice,” which is surrounded at the outside by the box labeled “social practice.” The diagram further qualifies that discursive practice involves text production and text consumption. This schematic has helped me to think about the ways I might frame my data in the larger context of who is producing and consuming the text while not losing sight of the situated and dialectical quality of the data within social and discursive practices. Additionally, I will make use of a number of Gee’s building tasks, but I will be most focused on succinctly implying how this sample of data provides fruitful

consideration of the identities and relationships at work in this scene of learning. With these three building task (identities and relationships) in mind, I will follow my analysis with a reconsideration of some of the epistemological foundations I am bringing to my work in improvisation and discourse. My task, as ever, is to think more carefully and productively about the ways participants in scenes of literacy learning improvise their identities and literacies in an effort to make meaning within their scenes.

Analysis

This sample of discourse (Appendix C) comes from a 30-second video clip taken from a school's global leadership class. There were 16 senior students in the class, and all students were seeking to complete their global studies diploma in addition to their normal graduation requirements. The global leadership course is the capstone experience of their global studies diploma. These students had been working together for approximately two months at the time this discourse was recorded. The students had been exposed to variety of improvisational theater exercises in an effort to teach them how to work together as a group effectively. By this point in the semester, these students had been directing and leading their class time with almost no teacher interference.

In the opening terms of Burke's pentad, which might begin to account for the discursive practices embedded in the social practices Fairclough describes, the *act* is the negotiation of how to get class started by using an improvisational theater exercise. The *scene,* as I have described above, is a typical start to a class period of the global leadership course. The principal *agents* in the scene are the two main speakers (Betsy and Darren). However, one must also consider the rest of the students in the class as impacting the improvisation as well as the power dynamic being negotiated between

these two students. Further, although peripheral agents, there are two teachers in the room who are impacting the discourse and the negotiation of power just by being present in the room. The *agency* in this scene is a focus of this sample analysis where improvisation is concerned. The agency of the scene lies in the two principal speakers literally negotiating with one another about how the class should begin. The *purpose* of this negotiation and exchange is to get class started in a way that will facilitate a positive class. This clip captures the start of a class period where students had decided to employ a previously used improvisational theater exercise to get their class started—a yes-circle.

The yes-circle exercise involves members of the group standing in a circle facing one another. One person (A) starts the exercise by pointing, silently at another person (B) in the circle. Person B says "yes" to person A after making eye contact, which gets initiated by the pointing. As soon as person B says "yes," person A starts walking across the circle to take the space of person B. Before person A arrives, person B needs to point at someone else in the circle in order to occupy a new space leaving the old space open for person A. The pointing person may not leave their space until they receive the "yes" confirmation initiated by his or her pointing. Ideally, the group gets in the habit of affirming and adding on to the pointed initiation.

This exercise embodies one of the fundamental principles of improvisation mentioned earlier that touches on listening, affirming, and playing. The principle of yes-and necessitates partners in a scene affirming one another and then adding on to the initiation or offer of the other player. Person A initiates the scene. Person B affirms the initiation of person A and then adds something on to that initiation. Subsequently, person A affirms person B's offering and adds something to that contribution. In order for the

scene to work, the improvisers must maintain this pattern of yes-and throughout their scene. The yes-circle exercise is fundamentally a two-person scene with a simple act of yes-and that gets repeated over and over again. The scene falls apart and someone runs into someone else unless everyone is using the yes-and move. Listening, both literal and figurative, are required in order to be focused and attentive to the participants in need of a spot in the circle. The exercise depends on everyone affirming the basic tenets of the game implicitly while also requiring an explicit affirmation by saying "yes." The playing arises from the yes-circle building energy and getting the group in mood to listen and affirm. Listening and affirming *are* the playing in this particular exercise.

The global leadership class had taken to opening their class time with some improvisational theater exercises. The discourse at the beginning of this particular class can be better understood using Gee's building tool for thinking about relationships. This building tool will allow for analysis of the discourse below in terms of the relationships the students are trying to create between one another. Further, this particular building tool will allow for the overlay of the yes-and principle. Using an understanding of the relationships enacted in the discourse, the use, disuse, or degree of use of the principle can be observed in the discourse. Ideally, students are working to build affirmative relationships with one another before undertaking the work they had assigned for themselves for that particular class period. They may also be engaged in using the power afforded them by the teachers stepping backing, but this engagement is complicated by the fact that the students may still be improvising in a way that the believe will please or satisfy the teachers who taught them the exercise in the first place. The building task of attending to relationships is fraught with the need to account for how this exchange of

power gets improvised. The first thirty seconds of the class indicates varying degrees of improvisation in terms of establishing relationships that follow the yes-and principle while also using the previously developed literacy with improvisational theater exercise.

The first four lines of the discourse involve a number of different students talking over one another. Betsy had made the initial suggestion of doing a yes-circle, but some confusion ensued in forming the circle after getting out of the desks. Presumably, Betsy had been looking to start the class in such a way as to have her colleagues reminded of the collaborative nature of their work. The work necessitated a yes-and mentality. However, before the exercise can even begin students are asking questions and attempting to clarify aspects of their selected activity. Lines 1 thru 4 include these moments of clarification, but also Betsy attempting to interject ("I think…") and lead the group. Darren finally establishes the first line of discourse that does not get tracked over by others speaking.

In line 5, Darren seems to be trying to establish a relationship with his colleagues by initiating a different improvisational exercise (zip, zap, zop) than the one proposed by Betsy. The locus of power remains in question at this point given that no one's inciting suggestion has quite received the full yes-and from the rest of the ensemble. This attempt seems to be meant to support the idea of using improvisational activities. This support seems like affirmation, but changing the exercise suggests that there was implicit disapproval of the first idea. This line contains evidence of relationship building between student colleagues, but does not entirely embody the yes-and principle. Instead of affirming and adding to an idea, this line of discourse affirms, but changes the initial

idea. Darren is working to get attention and lead the group, but the leadership had already been initiated by Betsy.

Line 6 also suggests that Darren is conscious of the relationships in the room. This line seems to be a joke about the way his initiation gets ignored by the group ("make me look like an idiot"). Darren is the center of attention throughout these first few lines even as Betsy continues to work at regaining a position of leadership so as to finally initiate the original activity. Darren attempts to relieve the pressure of having been ignored by highlighting the ways he feels antagonized by the group. Again, this relationship establishment difficulty, and consequent negotiation of power, arises in part because there are no established leaders for this class. These moments of relationship establishment and tension are common in the class. Students were consistently balking at the implicit and explicit giving and taking of power throughout the semester between one another and between students and teachers.

Finally, in lines 7 thru 10, Betsy reestablishes herself as the leader of the group in relation to everyone else by commenting on the purpose of the exercise she had chosen. She amasses power by acknowledging the previous offers and yes-anding them back toward her own idea. This second attempt at initiation even manages to affirm, indirectly, the comments made by Darren when Betsy suggests, "we should maybe / remember also…" The "also" indicates that Darren's comments just before were somehow ideas that should be remembered. Darren's comments were perhaps not necessary to remember, but Betsy uses this moment to affirm what Darren has just said. She affirms that he has been talking, and then adds on information she deems important in terms of focus for the group. Betsy manages to improvise a response to

Darren's initial comments that follows fairly closely to the yes-and principle while also maintaining her power as the leader of the upcoming exercise.

Darren continues to create relationships in the discourse with his question in lines 11 and 12. However, once again, the relationship being established are in some ways contrary to the yes-and principle. Darren asks, "Should we put a time limit on this / so we don't use up the entire class?" The question implies a number of things about the ways Darren views the exercise. First, Darren is concerned about the amount of time to be spent on the exercise. This concern arises despite the fact that Betsy has proposed this exercise as a warm-up before starting into the conversations planned for that day. Additionally, the class had never spent more than three or four minutes doing this exercise. Second, the question implies that either the activity is a waste of time or too much time spent on the activity would be a waste. In either case, Darren is not making use of the yes-and principle. Instead of affirming and adding on to Betsy's moves to initiate the activity, Darren qualifies and implicitly comments on the activity again before it even starts. This move echoes the initial move of the discourse where Darren is proposing a different exercise altogether. The two speakers are improvising in agreement enough to continue the scene, but there decisions in these brief moments illustrate the ways power gets negotiated and improvised throughout this discourse.

Interestingly, Betsy responds again making use of a pattern of relationship building that could be characterized as following the yes-and principle. In lines 13 thru 15, Betsy suggests, "I think we should make it organic, but I'll make it to not last too long. / Cuz otherwise then we'll have to watch the clock." Betsy affirms the question by answering it directly, but she manages to answer without arguing with the content of the

question. Betsy's response fits nicely into the relationship building Gee would want to focus on in that she wants to maintain the position of a momentary group leader while bringing Darren into the activity without more delay or difficulty. She builds this relationship using a yes-and move. She answers the question and then indicates reasons for her answer. Even the reasons are not directly combative with the insinuations in the question, which only enforces the idea that Betsy is using this opportunity to affirm the concern expressed by Darren without giving the concern more credence than she believes it deserves. Darren relents after Betsy has enacted two consecutive exchanges where she affirms and then adds on to what came her way. Betsy then proceeds to successfully start the exercise.

This overarching mode of analysis can be used to examine more deeply a given exchange within those lines already analyzed. For example, even more attention might be paid to lines 11 through 15 in terms of the literacy and identity development in this scene of learning. One exchange within this short scene exemplifies a moment of yes-and that illustrates the ways these students were enabling themselves through their discursive and social practices. In lines 11 through 15, the two students already mentioned have the following exchange:

11. Darren: Should we put a time limit on this
12. so we don't use up the entire class?
13. Betsy: I think we should make it organic,
14. but I'll make it to not last too long.
15. Cuz otherwise then we'll have to watch the clock.

Betsy had been attempting to start class with a Yes-circle, and Darren had a few questions and concerns about starting class in the ways Betsy had proposed. Betsy has taken on the identity of a leader while Darren identifies himself as a concerned classmate who challenges Betsy's proposal. In this particular moment, Darren questions how much time should be spent on this opening activity. Betsy affirms that she has heard the concern by indicating she "won't make it…last too long." She basically says "yes" to the concern raised by Darren. She adds on to his concern by further suggesting how the activity should be focused ("organic") and she addresses a potential problem associated with Darren's question or concern ("otherwise then we'll have to watch the clock").

Here, Gee's building task concerned with identities can be used to compliment the ways these two students improvise and the way that improvisation can be described with improv theory. Given the identities established by these two participants, the outcome of this confrontation remained in question until Betsy affirmed and added-on to her scene partner's question. The activity of starting the class had become contentious as the students had been given more responsibility for directing their own class, and there had been considerable disagreement about the degree to which exercises like the Yes-circle were productive. Betsy and Darren represent two sides of the issue that most other students in the class had identified with at one point or another. Students recognized the power available in being responsible for starting class on their own terms, and many students adopted identities that provided an opportunity to take a role in this activity and the negotiation of the power associated with leading a class.

Despite the potential for tension inherent in any moments that negotiates power, the relationship developed in this potentially tense moment between these two students

remains positive. Darren feels as though he has been heard and his concerns have been addressed. Betsy has maintained the integrity of her leadership choice by indicating the importance of the exercise while still addressing questions and concerns. Ultimately, this relationship building and identity development makes way for the scene and class to continue. Almost immediately after this exchange, Betsy successfully starts the Yes-circle, and everyone participates in the exercise including Darren. The activity of starting class and the activity of doing a Yes-circle depends on the successful navigation of developing a relationship where both participants in this exchange can feel as though they are being respected and heard and their respective identities are being dignified. The yes-and move made by Betsy helps to explain how Darren and Betsy could come through the exchange feeling this way. By using this piece of improv theory (yes-and), an analyst has one more way of thinking about how this scene gets built through the discourse of the participants. Yes-and describes, and offers a way of understanding, this moment such that the analyst can discuss the improvised quality of the scene in terms of its improvisation, relationships, and identity. Being able to discuss the improvised quality of the scene enables an analyst to point to precise moments and moves in the discourse that illustrate various participants constructing identities from one improvised moment to the next.

Furthermore, even within this limited communicative event, the discursive practice and its relationship to the social practice can be recognized and described within the context of improvisation. Yes-and provides a means of describing the discursive move made by BC, and this move gets made within the context of the larger social practices inherent in relating to a peer in a classroom setting while also trying to lead an

entire group of peers. A student starting a class with a group of fellow students necessitates a complex series of yes-and gestures (linguistic and otherwise) in order for the student to successfully start the class. This brief exchange just isolates one of those moments between two students. These two students are consuming and producing this text on the spot. They are improvising while also enacting literacies and identities that they deploy in an effort to negotiate power.

As such, a complete analysis of this discourse necessitates being able to describe and analyze the discourse in terms of improvisation. Yes-and provides just one example of a piece of improv theory that describes a quality of this discourse. Specifically, yes-and describes the way the text was produced by Betsy and consumed by Darren. This piece of improv theory enables observation and analysis of the discourse in a way that compliments both Gee and Fairclough's approach to Critical Discourse Analysis. Both Gee and Fairclough imply that identity gets created and creates one moment at a time, but both need a means of observing and analyzing how participants improvise from one moment to the next in that process of creation. A fully-formed improv theory provides that means.

Conclusion

I hope to end this sample analysis by suggesting something about the way this investigation has shifted and complicated my earlier epistemological concerns and assumptions. Recently, a colleague of mine listened to me thinking about this data set out loud, and she suggested that I needed to think about the ways I was privileging Betsy over Darren with the analytical narrative I was creating to explain how Betsy "won out" over Darren. Successful or not, I have tried to avoid creating a narrative that privileged

one participant over another beyond privileging the ways the scene actually unfolded in reality. Instead, I am attempting to offer a way of describing the discourse between these two participants in way that acknowledges and makes use of the fact that these two participants are improvising their exchange while at the same time observing how they are making complicated moves involving their respective literacies, identities, and agencies.

Improvisational theater offers a fairly sophisticated means of describing the ways an improvised scene unfolds. Ensembles of improvisers have a shared language and set of principles that allows for self-reflective conversation and analysis of how their various improvised scenes were improvised to greater or lesser effect. I have tried to theorize a way of using a similar language and set of principles to better observe and analyze the discourse that arises in scenes of literacy learning and how identity and literacy are also situated within improvised processes. However, the underlying epistemology of the improvisational theater community almost always privileges certain values and outcomes within improvised scenes that are presented to an audience. Improvisational theater uses their theory to do more than describe the quality of improvisation observed in scenes. The self-reflective process undertaken by improvisational ensembles aims at placing value and making judgments about what makes a scene "good" or "bad." In trying to adapt improvisational theater's set of theories and principles, I have tried to be mindful of this value-laden epistemology. What constitutes a "good" scene of improvisation in a theater setting may not make for a particularly "good" scene of learning. More to the point, I am not sure I want to determine whether a scene of learning is "good" or "bad." I hope I have worked to find a way to better describe and,

thereby, better understand how scenes of literacy learning unfold through an improvised process. Improvisational theater provides a reflective, purposeful means of describing and understanding that quality of improvisation.

Throughout this dissertation, my purpose has been to take the nascent steps towards developing a robust theoretical framework that would enable educators and education researchers to observe and reflect on the ways learning is an improvised performance. Further, the initial development of this improv theory has been aimed at better understanding how teachers and students improvise the various literacies and identities they intentionally and unintentionally use throughout their performance as they learn and negotiate power. Given the difficulty of noticing improvisation, improv theory offers a starting point for making the improvised practices visible by observing the ways teachers and students embody and manifest their identities through ensemble performances. By attending closely to the ways teachers and students listen, affirm, and play (using the highly involved understandings of these categories derived from improvisational theater), educators and education researchers have a way of beginning to talk about improvisation and learning. The more highly evolved this theory becomes the more highly evolved that talk will become. With a more sophisticated way of talking about improvisation, teachers, students, and researches have a better chance to talking in a way that leads to reflection that might offer pathways to improving the ways we improvise.

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APPENDIX A: SOPHOMORE ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT #1

1. Ryan: No, no questions? Dynamite. What do you want to talk about? I'm ready.
2. John: I have one question real quick. I'm just gonna go in front of everybody. When they say "I god" what are they saying?
3. Da'marcus: Is it like my god?
4. Genevieve: I was wondering that too.
5. John: They just say "I god" and from like something like in the middle of a sentence they'll be like "I god I'm going to town tomorrow" or something. I don't really. I'm not following.
6. Ryan: Can you show us one?
7. John: I'll look for one.
8. Ryan: That would be great.
9. Genevieve: I know what you're talking about.
10. Austin: Yeah, they're kind of all over the place.
11. Da'marcus: I think it means like "my God."
12. Genevieve: Yeah, I was thinking like, yeah, like "My god."
13. Liliah: It means like "oh my goodness."
14. (laughing)
15. Cameron: I saw that too.
16. Genevieve: I don't think that works in every...
17. John: "I god almighty" so...
18. Ryan: Well what page? What page?
19. John: Uh, 78.
20. Ryan: Page 78.
21. Thibault: Where? Like at the bottom.
22. Da'marcus: Right in the middle.
23. Ryan: "I god almighty" Yeah, I think it's an exclamation. Like Oh my gosh good grief like whatever your favorite...
24. Da'marcus: I think it's like "*I God*" [in a higher, animated voice]
25. John: I've just never heard someone say that.
26. Da'marcus: (laughing) That's how I say it...
27. Ryan: That's exactly how Da'marcus says it...
28. Da'marcus: I do voices at home…when I'm in my room
29. Ryan: I'll bet you do.
30. Da'marcus: That's the only way I can get through it.
31. Ryan: Yeah, I think that's the best way to get through it...

APPENDIX B: SOPHOMORE ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT #2

1. Ryan: Uh, great so then like in the book what are some examples of themes and motifs? (Pause w/ audible yawn) We're making progress by the way without me saying anything. Good work.
2. Eleanor: Uh. Doesn't Janie like release her hair. When her hair's up that could be like a motif…the way she like
3. Austin: Yeah, she...
4. Eleanor: Or like puts it up that's a motif
5. Ryan: So what's the theme?
6. Eleanor: Uh, I don't know. I could go with...
7. Da'marcus: Freedom
8. Olive: I was gonna say freedom...
9. Eleanor: Freedom and that kind of thing and then the actual symbol would be her hair.
10. (incomprehensible)
11. Ryan: OK Sure. So you're agreeing with the tangibility thing that like the marriage is the actual act that shows up in the book and those acts in total stand in for a larger idea that's the theme.
12. Da'marcus: Get it. [responding to K's hand being up having looked up the definition of theme]
13. Charlotte: It says a theme is a subject or topic on which a person writes or speaks anything proposed as the subject of discussion or discourse.
14. Genevieve: I guess like one of…at the beginning we talked about how her like I don't know what the word is I guess like the hair like could be like the tree…the pear tree…that could be the motif (incomprehensible)
15. Ryan: Trees is the motif?
16. Genevieve: Yeah.
17. Ambrose: Cuz they do talk about the on like the back cover. They always talk about the great the giant tree. The thing we talked about that earlier. That's a good one.
18. Genevieve: Oh yeah…maybe it could
19. Ambrose: That would, that would
20. (incomprehensible)
21. Austin: I feel like the tree was a very reoccurring thing in each of the books. Like, Janie like finds like new trees to go under after like each town she moves to…
22. Ambrose: Could that be like, could that be like a new stage in her life?
23. Austin: Yeah
24. Ambrose: Like she's underneath the peach tree in the like chapter 2. When she thinks about when she thinks about like I guess the sex part
25. Genevieve: Oh was it peach tree? I said pear I think. Oops.
26. Ambrose: Oh, I have no idea.
27. Ryan: Pear tree.
28. Genevieve: Oh really, I was right. Yes!
29. Ambrose: And her (incomprehensible) changes there.

30. Austin: Yeah, like on page 77 she finds like a new tree and then she finds like blooming trees but (incomprehensible) 77 says all the time she herself set under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes somebody near about making summer time
31. Genevieve: Then there was that quote that's on the back of the book…Janie saw life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered things enjoyed things done and undone…dawn and doom was in the branches…and there's tree branches on the cover
32. Da'marcus: there's a real tree on my book.
33. Eleanor: I feel like the tree is more like a symbol cuz it's like a physical object unless you're talking about like the growing of the tree, but I feel like the tree and then like sex would be the motif and the overarching theme would be like desire. That's just my (incomprehensible)
34. Ryan: What's the difference between a symbol and a motif?
35. Eleanor: Uh. The motif is like action or something's happening. I mean I feel like they kind of could be interchangeable.
36. Genevieve: Yeah, if we're talking about like symbols...
37. Ryan: I'm not sure if they're interchangeable, but I think they're very much interrelated particularly in the way that symbols and motifs relate back to a theme…so for example, I think I think I think your example is very nice it's very succinct. It's easy to grapple with. Her hair. The fact that we see her hair many times is a motif. Um. In each of those moments, the hair is a symbol, is she bound up? or free? Um. Right. Like, it symbolizes her like this external thing is symbolizing some sort of internal state.
38. Genevieve: Is the tree also motif?
39. Ryan: Hang on let me finish this one…um so so um the theme again is something about freedom or um
40. Da'marcus: Slavery?
41. Ryan: Yeah, I think, I think, slavery. Like by in like slavery, not always in this book do we mean the history of slavery in the united states. We sometimes mean like bound, enslaved. Uh…working
42. Liliah: Entrapped?
43. Ryan: Entrapped. Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. It's not like like I think I think because both of the like both the history of slavery in American and entrapment because both of those are in this book, I would be careful I would be careful with the distinction between the two. So again, her hair because it shows up multiple times I would argue is a motif in each of those moments each of those instances that we read it in the book it serves as a symbol. A symbol of this theme…the the motif contributes to this theme of Janie finding herself the change in her life the ways in which she is constrained and not constrained. Um I would suggest that a symbol is sometimes a symbol one time. Right? For it to be a motif, you kind of have to have it again.
44. Genevieve: (incomprehensible) a recurring symbol?
45. Ryan: Whereas a symbol like even if we had only seen the green light once in Gatsby, I think you could still make it a symbol. Um. The symbol isn't a motif until we see it repeatedly. But don't but like so this is a simple example that I

think…it's not simple. But it's a straightforward example you could use to think about all these things in connection with one another symbols, motifs, and themes. Um. Sometimes it's more complicated than that. Right. That like um, I would suggest that in The Great Gatsby, there are moments that are motifs…um…like the idea of…like the theme is like confession…revealing what is secret. Um and that that happens with different characters throughout the book so that's a motif that happens with different characters and I think uses different symbols. In those different senses. Um so, this becomes dramatically more complicated. Or can become dramatically more complicated. Does that make sense? Like, I think the hair example is a nice example.

46. Eleanor: Yeah, so wait if you're connecting to Gatsby green light you could like use as a motif, but then if you were taking an individual situation you could use it as a symbol.
47. Ryan: Right. So like so like, the green light is is is a symbol. If it's a symbol that I've seen multiple times throughout the novel which I do then I could argue it's a motif. The theme that that motif contributes to is something like unfulfilled dreams, unreachable dreams, unfulfilled longing…something like that.
48. Eleanor: Okay.

APPENDIX C: GLOBAL LEADERSHIP TRANSCRIPT

1. Courtney: I wasn't [unintelligible]
2. Darren: I'm just trying to get your attention. [Betsy: I think…]
3. Unidentified: Okay, guys. [Betsy: I think…]
4. Betsy: [I think…]
5. Darren: It was zip, zap, zop, you know, but [Betsy: I think…] that's cool make me look like an idiot.
6. Betsy: Ummm, I think we should maybe remember also the point is not to just like say yes a bunch of times repeatedly, but like to like feel the affirmation in the group…
7. Darren: Should we put a time limit on this so we don't use up the entire class?
8. Betsy: I think we should make it organic, but I'll make it to not last too long. Cuz otherwise then we'll have to watch the clock.
9. Darren: Okay.
10. Betsy: [points across room]
11. Unidentified: Yes.

APPENDIX D: STUDENT ASSENT FORM

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

On Improvisation, Learning, and Literacy

I agree to participate in Mr. Welsh's study of the ways teachers and students improvise as a part of their classroom practice. I understand that Mr. Welsh wants to do this study in order to learn more about the connections between improvisation, learning, and literacy. I agree to allow classes where I am present to be video recorded. I understand that I will not be required to do anything outside the normal expectations and routines of our typical class. I understand that Mr. Welsh will not alter my grades for classes due to my participation or lack thereof in this study. Mr. Welsh will video record my class once a month throughout the fall 2013 semester. He will announce ahead of time that the recording will take place. I know that Mr. Welsh will not use my name in his writing and that I can change my mind about being included in the data set at any time.

______________________________ ______________________________

Signature of the Principal Investigator (Mr. Ryan C. Welsh) Date

______________________________ ______________________________

Signature of Participant (student) Date

APPENDIX E: PARENT CONSENT FORM

Parent Consent
On Improvisation, Learning, and Literacy

Project Title and Purpose:
Your child is invited to participate in the data generation process for a research study entitled "On Improvisation, Learning, and Literacy." This is a study to develop a theory of the ways teachers and students improvise as a part of their learning and literacy development.

Investigator:
This study is being conducted by Ryan C. Welsh, an upper school English faculty member at Providence Day School and a doctoral student in the Curriculum and Instruction PhD program at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte. Ryan C. Welsh is the Principal Investigator for this research.

Description of Participation & Length of Participation:
I am going to video record 45-minute class sessions once a month throughout the fall 2013 semester in an effort to capture moments of classroom conversation and practice. These moments will serve as examples for developing the ideas that will be the product of this dissertation study. Students will not be asked to do anything other than what we would normally do in the course of our work as a class at Providence Day School. Participating in this study will involve nothing more than normal participation in our class.

Risks and Benefits of Participation:
There is a risk that some students might participate differently in the course of our class knowing that the class is being video recorded. This risk has been minimized by keeping the students informed about the study and their participation. Further, I will not use any data collected involving students who do not give their assent along with their parent's consent. The benefits of participating in the study will include making vital contributions to this dissertation study that will enable the teachers to understand how literacy and learning happen in improvised moments of instruction.

Volunteer Statement:
Your child is a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you and your child. Your child may stop at anytime even after you and your child decide to be in the study. Your child will not be treated any differently if he or she decides not to participate or if he or she stops once the study has started.

Confidentiality
Any information about your child's participation, including his or her identity, is confidential. The following steps will be taken to ensure this confidentiality:

- Your child's name and all names in his or her data will be replaced with pseudonyms when the recorded observations are transcribed in order to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of your child.
- Observation tapes will be destroyed before the expiration date of the study.
- All informed consent forms and observation transcription notes will be separated and coded before data analysis.
- The reports will NOT contain any identifiable information specific to your child.

- All records will be stored in a locked file cabinet and on a password protected laptop and iPad, only accessible to the principal investigator.

Fair Treatment and Respect:

UNC Charlotte wants to make sure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. Contact the University's Research Compliance Office (704.687.1871) if you have any questions about how you are treated as a study participant. If you have any questions about the project, please contact Ryan Welsh at (704.887.6000) or via email (ryan.welsh@providenceday.org). You may also contact the responsible faculty member for this research project, Dr. Lil Brannon at lil.brannon@uncc.edu.

Approval Date: 10/23/2013

Participant & Parental Consent

I have read the information in this consent form. I have had the chance to ask questions about this study and about my child's participation in the study and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am at least 18 years of age, and I agree to allow my child to participate in this research project. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form after it has been signed by me and the Principal Investigator.

____

Child's Name (PLEASE PRINT)

____________________________	____________________________	________
Parent's Name (PLEASE PRINT)	**Parent's Signature**	**DATE**

____________________________	____________________
Investigator Signature	**DATE**