Carol Collins and Barbara Everson

Writing and Performing Across Cultures

Using improvisation helped me to learn to be daring and take chances and express myself. It really made me feel good to know that my story was really worth improvising. It showed me that all writing can be made into something if you just take the time and work with it. Improvisation helps us think and concentrate while having fun at the same time.
—Sonya Groves, ninth grade

When we began working together in Barbara’s classroom in 1991 we had many questions for each other. The first had to do with the name of the project: Writing and Performing Across Cultures. We talked a lot about the phrase “across cultures.” Over the past two years, as we’ve reflected on what actually happened in Barbara’s classroom, we’ve come to understand that “across cultures” has a special meaning for us. We haven’t used performance and writing to bring multicultural literature into the classroom for interpretation, although we agree that this practice is important and valuable. We have instead focused on students’ writings and their improvisations as classroom texts that offer up images, stories, and information about their different backgrounds, language, histories: across cultures, that is.

Other questions had to do with “writing” and “performing.” How could we use drama activities to encourage students to look upon themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers; to encourage sharing and critical thinking? We wanted to engage students — individually and as a group — in exploring what literacy means on a personal level; to establish a climate for thoughtful consideration of the processes of reading and writing and for the playful and spontaneous use of language. We agreed that improvisation met all of these criteria, especially when we used improv as a nonjudgmental device that promoted students’ interpreting and revising of texts.

We looked for evidence that improv helped students to understand the writing process and to see that they personally are legitimate sources of information for other writers in the classroom. Improvisation naturally links itself to the dramatic arts, but with some enigmatic properties. It is acting; yet it isn’t. Students do “take part,” but the part they take is not a script to be memorized, recited, or even read. Instead, improvisation as a part of the writing process reflects student ideas, student interpretation, and student writing design. Because improv is by definition spontaneous, students bring their ideas, interpretations, notions of form, and — perhaps most importantly — their language to the texts. Improvisation usually leads students to use dialogue, detail, and to do a good bit of self-initiated revising and redrafting.

Improvis, like writing itself, involves a certain amount of risk, and older students especially are sometimes at first reluctant to try. Our students were initially concerned with “getting it right.” Being the products of “one-right-answer” teaching, they wanted to rehearse and practice. But there is no one right way with improv — only questions, options, and possibilities. For this reason, improv works best with small groups. For example, when students needed ideas for short stories to add to their writing folders, we began the process by improvising a sentence: “She/He opened the box and took out a ___.” After completing the sentence and giving names to their main character, students freewrote for five minutes, each of them developing the beginnings of a story line. Carl’s went like this:

Gary opened the box and took out a ring. He had found the box while digging in the back yard. He was getting ready to plant a few rows of tomatoes and found the box unexpectedly. When he looked in the bottom of the box, he found a letter. It was
addressed to his wife, Martha, and dated November 8, 1920. Gary went into the house stunned. He wanted to go immediately and ask her about the letter and the ring, but she was asleep and very sick at the time …

Carl’s response group had several questions about what he had written, so they decided to improvise this scene. We started out with one or two willing participants who worked within the haven of a familiar circle of their peers. These students began by choosing a brief segment of a piece of writing that puzzled them. They began with simple questions that would provide more information about the characters, the setting, the motivation:

How old are these people?
How did he feel when he opened the box?
What exactly did he find in the box?
Why was she lying down?

These questions helped to set up the improvisation. We all watched as Susan read Carl’s paper a few times and then began to improvise. The improvisation took a couple of minutes. Carl took notes as he watched Susan’s interpretation of the beginning of his story. Susan’s words, her body movement, her facial expressions all served to expand and interpret the original text, to add language and nuance and tone. After the improv, we discussed what we had seen and heard. Some of us agreed with Susan’s interpretation; some didn’t. We considered everyone’s ideas, and Carl began to rewrite his original draft, using (and transforming) what he wanted from the improv:

Gary opened the old box and took out a ring. He had found the box while digging in the backyard. He was getting ready to plant a few rows of tomatoes, and came across it unexpectedly. When Gary looked in the bottom of the box, he found a letter. Gary thought to himself, ‘Where did this come from? A ring and a letter?’

Gary read the letter, which was addressed to his wife, Martha: ‘November 8, 1920. That’s forty years ago! Engaged? Who is Thomas?’ At this point Gary was partly confused, partly surprised. Why had she kept the letter? And why had she buried it in the backyard? Gary wanted to go immediately and ask her about it, but his wife was asleep and needed her rest.

Carl read his draft to us, and we had a clearer picture of who Gary was and how his discovery affected him personally. We also began to speculate about Martha, his wife. Is she seriously ill? What kinds of relationships can we assume for Gary, Martha, and Thomas? The students left the room discussing how the story might be developed further. Carl’s story had come to life for all of us; the character had become real, and as a result, the writer had several possibilities for developing his story. Carl said that the improv especially helped him “by showing how the character reacted, what the character was like, and what the character said.”

Beyond Writing Revision
In addition to motivating students to extend ideas for their stories, improvisation dramatically changes classroom dynamics and the culture of the classroom. Improv demands spontaneous actions, movements, and language, and promotes intense and purposeful collaboration. Over the course of a few months, students naturally began making decisions together and having what they described as “real” discussions. In our weekly one-hour session, students listened to different points of view, heard real and appropriate language differences, and witnessed multiple interpretations. Students gradually came to appreciate, enjoy, and depend on collaboration. We want to argue that improvisation is a practical tool that allows students’ linguistic and cultural differences to function as starting points for high-quality democratic teaching and learning.

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As students began to talk more openly about their writing without fear of judgment, they listened to each other and accepted each other’s ideas with serious consideration. They discovered that there is more than one point of view, more than a right or a wrong way to come to any conclusion, more than one opinion. Students talked and wrote about considering various meanings and forms for their essays and stories.

Sonya, for example, wrote a memoir of a childhood experience. After reading her first draft to her response group, Sonya explained, “My writing group was confused about the closet and why the mama was so mad.” Sonya’s writing group selected a short segment from Sonya’s draft to focus on for improvisation:

My friend, Kenita, and I decided to play hide and go-seek in the house. While I was counting, she went
and hid in the closet. When I went to find her, her mother walked in and caught us playing in the closet. She was mad as could be but, I didn’t know it was a house rule of no playing in the closet. For the next hour she fuzzed and fuzzed and fuzzed, and finally sent us to bed.

We had an understanding that mannerisms and dialogue were vastly different when played by different students, leading to a discussion in differences in cultural backgrounds.

Meya, Amy and James volunteered to play Kenita, Sonya, and the mother. Sonya sat and watched as her group improvised the scene:

Kenita: Look, let’s hide in the closet.
[Kenita and Sonya tiptoe into the closet]
Sonya: Is this your mom’s clothes?
Kenita: Yeah.
Sonya: She has lots of shoes.
Kenita: Yeah. They big.
Sonya: Is she an athlete?
Kenita: No, she don’t have no athlete’s foot.
[Kenita’s mom enters the scene, downstairs]
Kenita’s mom: Kenita! Where you hidin’?
Kenita: Uh-oh.
Kenita’s mom: Kenita, you answer me right now!
Kenita: Don’t say nothin’! Be still.
[Kenita’s mom goes up the stairs and into the bedroom]
Kenita’s mom: Kenita, you in big, big trouble! You answer me!
[Kenita’s mom opens the closet door.]
Kenita’s mom: Kenita! And Sonya! You get out here this instant!
[Kenita and Sonya scramble out of the closet]
Kenita’s mom: I can’t believe I leave you alone for a few minutes and you disobey my rules. You know better, Kenita. Now, both of you, you run on into that bedroom and you lay down. Without a word! Now!

As they improvised, the students added emotion, detail, movement, and dialogue to the story. Sonya explained her reactions to the improvisation: “After seeing the improv, I wanted to work on the ending and on the characters. I could see that more could be added, and explained.” Sonya read her revised draft to us the next day:

It was raining outside and Kenita and I always played games until my mother came to get me. ‘What we gone play?’ Kenita said. ‘It’s raining outside.’

‘I don’t know. Maybe we can pretend we are outside in here.’ Kenita always had good ideas about what we should play; today she didn’t.

Today I thought of what we should play, and it was against house rules. (I didn’t know house rules, and my idea was so good that she forgot to tell me.) ‘I think we should play hide-and-go-seek, and I’ll count while you hide,’ I said.

I was counting and Kenita hid in the closet. ’85, 90, 95, 100. Ready or not, HERE I COME!” I yelled.

I ran and found her in the closet. Kenita and I laughed and talked in the closet. Then her mother, Patrice, walked in! She didn’t ask any questions. She just automatically started fussing.

‘Where do you all think you all get off, disobeying house rules?’
She fuzzed and fuzzed until finally sent us off to bed.

‘And don’t get up until I tell you your mother’s here, Sonya! Kenita, don’t you get up at all!’
We both went to sleep.

Not only did Sonya’s story change as a result of the improv, issues of family relationships, authority, and cultural practices surfaced as we all reflected on her story in light of what we had seen and heard. As different students played the role of the mother, we saw changes in the character, from permissive inflections and mannerisms to aggressive tones and postures. Sonya realized that in her next draft the dialogue would show the aggressive side of her character, which was unseen in her first writing. Also, we had an understanding that mannerisms and dialogue were vastly different when played by different students, leading to a discussion on differences in cultural backgrounds.

For example, in some scenes the mother was the dominant character; in other scenes, the child was dominant. In other stories, the father held the most prominent role. This led us to think about how our personal backgrounds affect the way we see things and the way we write. Through improvisation, we are then able to illustrate these differences and discuss them openly. Then the authors can add these subtle but important nuances to their writing.

Sonya and some of our other students later talked about how improvisation affected their writing. Sonya said, “Before using improv, I wrote only because the teacher asked me to. I wrote what she asked for. I did the
assignment and that was it. When I turned it in, I was finished with it. When the class improvised from my memoir, I was so excited about it, and kept writing. Even after I got my grade, I still worked on it.”

James added, “Using improvisation lets you see right out in front of you, lets you hear the voices. It helps you think.” Sonya agreed, “I saw that many people had different opinions on the role of the characters. Role playing helps you to understand more about the scenes and gives you a clear picture of them. I changed my way of thinking about the characters and the scenes.”

Meya said, “The improv take off from what we first wrote, but really change as we do it. Though they’re real different from the writing, it gives you lots of ideas to take back to the paper with you.”

“With improvisation,” Amy added, “you get to see more, and see different directions to take. You see more choices.”

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Chip offered another encouraging comment, “Before this class, I didn’t know you could do so much with just one piece of writing. Before this class, I didn’t like to write. But after using improv, I started to see things that I could do. It even helped with my literature exams. I started seeing the characters in an improv. I started to get better grades.”

He later wrote in his journal,

“I’ve personally discovered in these classes that there are many more things in writing than just a first and second draft. It has shown me how acting out a writing piece can help me visualize what’s really going on and what people are really getting from my stories. It has told me I’m not just an English II student, I’m a person who has worked with my classmates to start a very successful program to be carried on in the future. It has taught me that working with friends can really improve many qualities about yourself and others.”

Implications
After hearing Sonya’s two versions of her memoir at a recent NCTE conference, one teacher in the audience commented, “It seems to me she found her voice.” This was wonderful to hear, and certainly true, but there’s even more to the picture. As we explored several improvisations around Sonya’s story, the roles of the mother were played by different students of different races. Each brought separate insights toward the motivation of the character. And Sonya took bits from both players. Accepting language and meaning from all students was routinely part of the improvisational process. After the scene had been improvised and questions answered, it was up to Sonya to find the voice that suited her characters and the meaning that was appropriate to her story.

We still have questions, of course, questions about finding support (financial and otherwise) for collaborative projects such as ours, questions about the place for creative drama in classrooms across the curriculum, questions about assessment, questions about the consequences of the experience for ourselves and our students. But we are certain that improvisation offers a catalyst for motivating students and a framework for inviting their insights and interpretations. Beyond those practical implications, we believe that improvisation allows students and teachers to view each other in new ways and to form classroom communities that encourage multiple discourses and texts.

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