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THE UPSIDE DOWN PICNIC TABLE

The Wonder of Learning Through Improvisational Play

Lynn Fels

> "Why is that picnic table upside down?" I wonder irritably, as I turn the corner of the building. We are following the next group of students to the performance space that they have chosen for their scene. My students, who come from a variety of faculties across campus, are exploring site-specific theatre: each group has chosen a location and created a scene inspired by the space. The parking lot was transformed into a stage for one scene; another group used a cross walk, another chose a tree on the hill outside our classroom.
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> "They're not supposed to rearrange the environment." I glare at the upside down picnic table, mentally deducting marks in my head.

This chapter attends to the wonder of play, and the learning that happens when undergraduate students are invited to reimagine their world of engagement through improvisational play.[1] We often forget that teaching wonder is a responsibility that spans all grade levels, and that students of all ages are hungry for opportunities to learn through play. I offer an invitation to educators—drawing metaphorically from a quote by theatre director Eugenio Barba as he advised his actors—that they learn to abandon curricular "walls of cement," and attend to the "melodies of your temperature" (1995, p. 62), to engage in learning *with* their students. When we give our students permission to play, and encourage our students (and ourselves) to explore curriculum in imaginative ways, wonder illuminates our learning.

As a drama educator and researcher, moments call me to attention; like a child's tug on my sleeve, they whisper, *stop, this moment matters*. Philosopher David Appelbaum (1995) proposes that the stop is *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*.

A stop is a moment when we realize that there are multiple possibilities, that the script that we have committed to memory can be improvised, that other choices of action are available to us. A stop reveals our habits of engagement; a stop reminds us that we don't yet have all the answers. A stop invites us to reconsider our engagement with others. A stop is an invitation to reimagine who we are, and who we might be, in relationship with our environment, with those we love, and those we teach. A stop is a reminder to let go of what we know, or expect of others, and embrace the uncertainty, surprise, and joy of learning.

I attend to moments that stop me. These moments may occur when I engage in improvisational play with my undergraduate students, or when I am teaching my graduate students, or when I am involved in communal activities in everyday living. A stop moment may occur as I witness or listen to myself in conversation or in interaction with others. I am thrown momentarily off-balance, caught unawares. *Why are you tugging at my sleeve?* Such moments are uncomfortable. They are most often moments that arise in response to pedagogical resistance, either from my students, those with whom I am engaging, or when I myself am in conflict with the task at hand. Such moments, I now realize, are those moments that interrupt me when I am most self-engaged, concentrating on the hard work of teaching, when I have momentarily lost the joy of teaching, of living, intent on "getting the job done." It is in these times, a stop will occur, reminding me that I have forgotten to wonder, "what would happen if…?"

I'd like to share three stories of stop moments that called me to attention, tugging on my sleeve with a child's impatience that invited me to engage anew in learning with my students. I share these three stories because they illustrate how we may collectively come to experience learning through improvisational play, interrupting the script of what we know or what we expect, and allowing ourselves to create opportunities for imagination and inquiry.

One story explores a pedagogical moment that tapped me on the shoulder in the middle of a lecture I was giving to a class of pre-service teachers. Another involves the upside down picnic table. But first, through the following story, I will speak to my work on performative inquiry as an action site of learning (Fels & Stothers, 1996; Fels, 1998, 1999, 2010), showing how engaging in improvisational play offers us, students and teachers alike, the opportunity to invite wonder into our classrooms. My understanding of performative inquiry as a medium for reconsidering who I am, as an educator, begins with a confrontation between myself and a grade two student, who balked at engaging in the role he was expected to play.

Performative Inquiry and the Cow in the Field

Peformative inquiry invites educators and students into collaborative exploration through the arts. Its vehicles of inquiry are our bodies, our imaginations,

our experiences, our feelings, our memories, our biases, our judgments and prejudgments, our hopes and our desires—who we are, in anticipation of who we have yet to become. The catalyst for inquiry may be a question, an event, an issue, a story, a phenomenon, which we wish to explore, to investigate, to recreate through the media and tools of our chosen artistic expression (theatre, music, dance, visual arts, film, mixed media, writing) to come to new understanding and learning.

Performative inquiry was born of a moment: in which I came face-to-face with a grade two student who refused to be the cow in our play, *Jack and Jill and the Beanstalk*. Using the fairytale as our beginning point (I gave Jack a sister Jill for purposes of gender equality), the grade two class and I created each scene of the play through improvisation.[2] While improvising the first scene with Jack and Jill and their mother, I noticed the cow was sulking in the field.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I don't want to be a cow!"

"Listen," I reply, "you can be any kind of cow you want. Guernsey, Black Angus, Holstein." I'm hoping he'll choose the latter as we've a black and white cow costume in the costume trunk.

"Any type of cow?" He eyes me skeptically.

"Your choice." I can see the gears working in his brain. Suddenly his eyes brighten, and he grins.

"All right. I'll be a cow that plays goalie for the NHL and I'll bring my goalie pads, and my net, and my stick, and I'll practice saving goals in the field…."

In spite of his enthusiasm, my first impulse is to say no. *A cow doesn't play hockey!* As I teeter precariously in indecision, I experience what I now recognize as Appelbaum's "stop." "Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other. It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways … It is the stop. (Applebaum, 1995, pp. 15–16). A stop asks that we pause and reconsider what action is possible…

To say no would be to maintain the status quo in the power dynamics between teacher and student; to say no would be to play the curricular script as it is envisioned by the teacher; to say no would be to say no to a child's offer, his love of hockey; to say no would be to fail to consider the possibility of a co-created emergent curriculum; to say no would be a failure to reimagine a familiar story through a child's imagination. This stop moment between the child who wanted to be a cow who played goalie for the NHL and the director/teacher with her own expectations of the role in question presented what I now recognize as a curricular and pedagogical crisis.

This moment of tension speaks to the importance of what Maxine Greene (1978) asks of educators: to attend to their work with "wide-awakeness." So many of us, she proposes, sleepwalk through our lives, routinely attending to the tasks at hand. To be awake to what matters calls for an ethical and pedagogical alertness to the choice of actions that we make moment by moment in our daily encounters. Our actions in our relationships with children, with our students, with those we love, have consequences, and while we cannot anticipate all consequences, nor avoid all implications of our actions, we must be responsible for our actions in the moment, cognizant that each action may create one of many possible worlds that we imagine into being. We must not be careless in our choices. To be wide-awake, then, is to be mindful of the stops that occur in our everyday pedagogical experiences.

Our responsibility as educators then is to be present and awake to pedagogical moments that offer us opportunities to go beyond the prescribed curricular scripts that are dictated to us by others (or by the limitations we impose upon ourselves) and trust in a child's desire. Madeleine Grumet (1988) questions whether educators are merely handmaidens of the state, faithfully reproducing a curricular world of what is already known or expected to be known. What trespasses must be taken, what borders crossed, that new horizons might be explored? What kind of pedagogical country will I co-create with this child, I ask myself, if I say no to his imagining of a cow who plays hockey for the NHL?

Ah, but if I say yes, new pedagogical relationships and curricular possibilities may emerge. To say yes, would be to "lay down a path in walking" (Machado, as cited in Varela, 1987), alongside with my students, rather than asking them to follow a road well travelled. "What we do," Varela says, "is what we know, and ours is but one of many possible worlds. It is not a mirroring of the world, but the laying down of a world…" (1987, p. 62). A new play will evolve, not as I had imagined it or as the audience may be expecting, but as the children have created it to be.[3]

Arendt (1961) asks of educators that we love children enough to invite them into the world's renewal, not as we would have it, but as they will come to embody it through their own imagination and action. As a pedagogical experience, the wonder that is *Jack and Jill and the Beanstalk* is not located in the play itself, but in the learning that I came to understand through listening anew to children's ideas. The wonder is our shared experience co-creating the play, not as I had expected but as the children imagined it might be. Through this moment, and upon reflection, I come to understand that my responsibility as an educator and fellow traveller in their midst is to create the space and opportunity for children so that such wonder may occur.

All forms of expression are created through action, and action is embodied within the forms that emerge.[4] A tableau about a family having dinner together reveals students' understanding of perceived relationships between parents and children, siblings, and the roles undertaken by individual members of a family.

The family rituals, practices, experiences, and ways of engagement are exposed through the students' creative endeavors. The performances we create in improvisational play and in our lives express what we value, our relationships, our ideology, our expectations, our biases, our ambitions, our yearning and desires. In improvisational play, such as role drama, playbuilding, or tableaux, we respond through creative and critical action within a given context and environment, in relationship with others. Improvisational play allows us to replicate what is, comment upon how the world works, and explore new possibilities.

My tale about the child who wanted to be a cow who played goalie for the NHL, what I perceived as a confrontational moment, was really about my own understanding and tensions of what it means to release curricular control; to respect and invite the ideas of my students, to be willing to incorporate their lived experiences into curricular explorations, and to truly understand how to be in a meaningful pedagogical relationship with a child. Reflecting on this stop through the years has had an impact on my teaching and relationships with my students. This stop was a catalyst that eventually led to my doctoral work, which in turn, resulted in the conceptualization and articulation of performative inquiry (Fels, 1998, 1999). Performative inquiry offers a theoretical understanding of how the arts create an action space for learning (Fels & Stothers, 1996). I realized that as an educational researcher I could turn to the medium of the arts as a way of doing research, and recognized the value of attending to the stop moments that occur within our pedagogical action sites of inquiry. The practice of performative inquiry through the arts is to come to understand who we are, and what matters, and how we might encounter the world anew with wonder.

Spilling Sand on a Linoleum Floor

Fast forward three years, and this same drama educator, now a doctoral student, is teaching pre-service teachers the principles of teaching: classroom management, lesson planning, evaluation. She stops, and notes boredom on her students' faces, and realizes that she too, standing behind the lectern, is similarly bored. A visiting cohort of student teachers from Australia has dropped by, and they too look less than captivated with her lecture. She feels a pang of panic and disillusionment. She sends them all off for a coffee break, and retreats to her office where she wonders how to rescue her lecture, and how to re-engage both herself and her students in the teaching that is her responsibility. And then a thought, *What would happen if…?*

Searching through her props, she sighs with relief, and prepares for the second half of the lecture. Carefully, she pours cornmeal into a black bag. On the students' return, they become silent, curious, as she motions them to gather around her. Glancing over her shoulder, she inquires if any one of them may have been followed.

"I was, but I detoured through an alley and lost him," tentatively replies one student.

"I had to strangle a guard," confesses another. "He followed me to the door."

"Fool! We can have no violence. They will imprison us all." She looks around the group, staring into the eyes of each person present. "Is there any one here who would betray us?"

"No!" is the collective reply, and, satisfied, she pulls the black bag from her pocket. She spills golden grains of sand on the floor. She draws her finger through the sand, outlining a right-angle triangle, and announces a new mathematical formula.

"Tell no one what you have learned here. Our lives are at risk if we are discovered," she whispers. "Swear life long secrecy." They nod and raise their wrists in consent, each bearing the sign of infinity inked on their skin, and begin arguing how to secure safe passage back to their homes.

Boredom becomes engagement as the teacher in role as Pythagoras addresses her students as fellow conspirators; curriculum is experienced and embodied through improvisational play; a mathematical concept is learned within the historical context in which it was conceived. The wonder of the unexpected in the classroom that is improvisational play invites new ways of listening and being in attendance.

This instructor's moment of recognizing boredom on the faces of her students, and realizing that she too was bored, called forth two responses from the instructor: the first, one of pedagogical dismay; and the second, a desire to change the dynamics of learning in the room. *How, I wondered, could I be bored, when I am the one giving the lecture?*

This moment truly was a stop! By shifting gears and inviting my students into the improvisational world of mathematics and intrigue,[5] I offered my students a context and embodied experience that simultaneously enriched their interest in mathematics and illustrated the key principles of teaching that I was trying to share through my lecture. I learned, by attending to the stop that tugged on my sleeve, how important it is to be a teacher who listens to and responsively interacts with the learning experience of her students. A role play about Pythagoras' secret society becomes an entry point into learning how to create engaging lesson plans, manage classroom dynamics, and create curricular relevance through story and improvisational play.

During our debriefing, I confessed to my boredom during the first half of the lecture (yes, they all nodded, we were bored too). Speaking about curriculum, student engagement, and classroom management within the context of our experience together, I shared my own challenges and failures as an educator and talked about how strategies such as role drama and storytelling can enliven curriculum and engage students in learning. By participating in my impromptu role play, my students learned how engagement through improvisational play

opens up meaningful spaces for curiosity, collaborative inquiry and learning. They also learned that sometimes educators need to have courage to abandon their lesson plans, as I did with my lecture, and attend to the curriculum of the moment, in order that learning might occur.

Turning the Picnic Table and Educational Expectations Upside Down

I stand, arms folded, watching, as the group begins their scene. The upside down picnic table is suddenly a pirate ship, with three rambunctious pirates shouting.

"Look! To starboard! Swimming in the water!" The pirates brandish imaginary swords as two of the young female students swim in an imaginary sea.

"Women!"

"After them, mateys! We'll capture them and make thousands of dollars in ransom!"

"Not thousands, a million!" protests the oldest pirate, standing proud in the bow.

The young women, squealing in protest, are captured, and dragged into the boat.

"Oh, no!" shouts a pirate. "They're university students."

"And from the University of —" moans another, naming a rival university.

"Absolutely worthless!" snarls the aging pirate.

"Toss them back into the water!"

I frown, rolling my eyes as those around me laugh. But there is something familiar about this scene, something that calls to the child within me. The upside down picnic table tugs at a memory…

One sunny afternoon, a drama educator and her students, reluctant to spend the last remaining September light indoors, step outside the classroom to engage in site-specific performances. The instructor waves her arms expansively. "Go choose a place, and create a scene specific to that location."

One group turns a picnic table upside down, and with us all gathered around them, they perform a scene with a boatload of pirates. The pirates are wonderfully exaggerated in character and action, and soon I too begin to laugh. I recognize myself as I had once been as a child, the upside down picnic table reminiscent of the empty cardboard boxes and overturned chairs covered by blankets, in which my brother and I, as children, had sailed the seas. I forgive my students the upside down picnic table as I cherish the present moment and that long ago time, as a child, enraptured in a moment of play. But then, the scene dissolves into something unexpected.

> A man emerges from the shadows. He shouts, "Grandpa! What are you doing? Why is the picnic table upside down? Are you off your meds again?"

And with that abrupt accusation, our imaginary scene of pirates morphs into one of a solitary old man, adrift with his hallucinations; his pirate playmates disappear from view, as the irate grandson leads the old man away, his heroic stance now stooped with shame and defeat. The picnic table becomes again, just what it is, a picnic table, turned upside down, like an old man's life.

And here is the wonder of the moment. That we are, as audience, swept into the imaginary world of pirates, perhaps remembering ourselves long ago as children at play, only to tumble into a world of illusions real and imagined of who we are and who we might become, to anticipate, through the old man's stumble away from us, our own impending losses, frailties and needs—a momentary glimpse of unseen worlds, worlds desired, and worlds yet to be experienced. And I recognize in that initial moment of seeing the upside down picnic table that is my stop, a pedagogical and curricular failure to imagine new possible worlds of renewal yet to unfold. *How could I have been thinking of deducting marks? How could I have failed to trust my students in their offering?*

What opportunities for learning might emerge from this moment in which I saw at first only an upside down picnic table and students ignoring the boundaries of my instructions? I am reminded yet again—a moment of recognition that comes now through reflection—how rich the offerings of my students are in response to my invitations to engage in improvisational play. This stop reminds me how limited and limiting my own expectations are; that when students are offered the opportunity to play, to create, to engage in a project of inquiry, imagination, and renewal, a rich curriculum of issues, close to the heart, may be illuminated and explored. The learning that emerges from collaborative creative action is one that cannot be imagined in the solitary room that is our own imperfect understanding. The wonder of improvisational play through the researcher's and educator's lens of performative inquiry, is that we are called to stop, to attend, to reflect, and to see again that which is the gift of learning.

A Moment, a Child of Duration

> And education, too, is where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.
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> (Arendt, 1961, p. 196)

As mentioned earlier, Hannah Arendt asks us if we love children enough so as to invite them to engage in the world's renewal. If so, we must then ask ourselves: with what strategies might we engage our students so that they may experience the wonder of learning? As teachers, we need to attend to the melodies of our temperature of the moment, and ask ourselves how else we might be in action in the presence of those who journey with and beyond us.

All three stories that I shared with you—the boy who wanted to be a cow that played goalie with the NHL, the lecturer bored with her own lecture, the overturning of a picnic table by students—call upon the educator to be wide-awake, present, and attentive to the stops that are action sites of learning. We become the teachers we are by being present to and in the presence of those we teach who in turn, if we are willing, become our teachers.

Each stop, seen through the lens of performative inquiry, becomes itself an action site of learning. The challenge is whether or not we are willing to learn to identify and attend to the stops that tug on our sleeve in the chaotic dance that is our lives, *to pause to reflect upon why this stop, this moment of unease, arrests us.* In such a way, by attending mindfully to each stop, through reflection and questioning, we may come to moments of recognition, new learning that will shape our pedagogical journey. Such mindful attention to our pedagogical engagement with our students through a co-created curriculum requires compassion and a willingness to learn from those moments that call us to attention.

Jana Milloy (2007) writes, "a moment, a child of duration" (p. 157) and I imagine each stop moment as a pedagogical child, one whose responsibility is ours to attend to with care and compassion. The stops that arrest us as we engage with our students are moments that will have life-long consequences for us all, like a butterfly's wing that sets the air stirring. Thus we must attend to such moments with care; they are children of consequence whose presence will endure long after we have departed. Stops matter. They are our invitation to step beyond what we already know. And, in response, our students recognize our offering to them when we venture together beyond known horizons. One day I arrived at my classroom to discover a hand-printed sign taped on the door by one of my students: "Beware, the walls of this classroom have been known to disappear."

The wonder of learning is that we do not learn alone, but in the presence with and in the grace of our students who journey with us. Each stop moment is a gift that reminds us that *something else* is possible. Our challenge, as educators, is to reimagine our curriculum as a curriculum of the moment, an emergent unfolding of creative and critical pedagogical opportunities for possible action, moment to moment, as we listen to *the melodies of our temperature* in harmony, dissonance, vulnerability, and interplay with each other. The upside down picnic table is an invitation to attend with heart and imagination to our pedagogy, our curriculum as it emerges in our presence, our way of being in the world, and to understand that *how* we engage with our students is our threshold to wonder.

Notes

1 Improvisational play may be role drama, play building, improvisation, creating scenes, tableau, embodied storytelling or any other drama activity that we collectively engage in as creative and critical inquiry, exploration, and expression.
2 When I create plays with children I invite them to improvise each scene in the play ("What does the cow say when Jack and Jill come to take her away to the market? Let's try it and see what happens") instead of asking children to memorize scripts. I use this play creation technique of improvisation to scene so that the children feel ownership of the play; understand what they are saying and why because the words they are saying and the actions created are theirs; and, that they understand, as long as the meaning of what they are saying is retained, that the words may be changed or improvised during performance, thus avoiding those awkward moments that everyone experiences when a child forgets his or her lines.
3 The audience was surprised not only by the cow that played hockey for the NHL, but also by the ending (which also surprised me in its creation) in which a police officer arrives to arrest Jack and Jill and the Giant for killing the Giant! (see Fels, 2009).
4 My thanks to Rebecca Christofferson whose Master's thesis, *Dancing in the Belly: Performative Inquiry in Pregnancy,* first introduced me to Elliott Eisner's concept of action as being embodied within form (see also Fels, 2010).
5 My sincere appreciation to Skye Richards who created the role drama on Pythagorus for a summer drama education course that she participated in, from which I drew my inspiration. See Fels & Belliveau, 2008. I would also like to truly thank Patrick Verriour, my thesis supervisor, who first introduced me to pedagogical possibilities and practices of role drama (see Tarlington & Verriour, 1991).

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