TOPPLING THE “WATCHER AT THE GATES”: RESTAGING WRITING AS IMPROVISED REHEARSAL

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ABSTRACT

My experiences as an improvisational (improv) actor and director and my work as a teacher of writing suggest that there is a strong connection between the writing process and the way in which an improv acting troupe prepares for a public performance. Specifically, the structure and content of an improvised acting rehearsal provide a model for how composition instructors could re-incorporate the generation of ideas—what is often referred to as “prewriting” or “brainstorming”—into all stages of the writing process. I argue that we as instructors must generate a creative response to our students’ reluctance to make what they see as mistakes in their writing and to truly embrace writing as thinking. As composition theorist Peter Elbow argues, writing can "be…[an] ideal medium for getting it wrong” [original emphasis] (“Shifting Relationship” 286).

However, for many of our students, a draft is a textual space within which the instructor will point out their errors and correct their mistakes, not a tool with which to discover what it is they truly think. In this work, I will examine how composition instructors can use some of the fundamental elements of an improv acting rehearsal to create what I call the “improvised classroom,” a creative, collective space within which a writing teacher can re-present prewriting as an ongoing opportunity to create ideas and to test them, one which a writer can take advantage of throughout the writing process.
The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to Carnegie Mellon’s own No Parking Players for their inspiration; Dr. Norma Tilden for her unwavering support and sharp insight; and to all of my composition students from 2009 and 2010—who have been my first, best, and most demanding instructors.

Many thanks,

Katharine Torrey
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**INTRODUCTION**

My experiences as an improvisational (improv) actor and director, coupled with my work as a teacher of writing, suggest that there is a strong connection between the writing process and the way in which an improv troupe prepares for a public performance. Specifically, the structure and content of an improv acting rehearsal provides a model for how composition instructors could re-incorporate the generation of ideas—what is often referred to as “prewriting” or “brainstorming”—into all stages of the writing process. As process theorist Ann Berthoff notes in her book *The Making of Meaning*, composition “is a means of discovering what we want to say, as well as being the saying of it,” and thus demands that writers constantly create, test, and remake ideas throughout the writing process (20).

However, many first-year composition students are convinced that writers who encounter what Berthoff calls a series of “false starts, unfruitful beginnings, contradictions, and dead ends” are making “mistakes,” rather than engaging in “stages in a process” (22). For them, writing is a contained, linear process whose purpose is for the writer to “get it right” the first and only time she puts her fingers to the keyboard. In this work, I will examine how composition instructors can use some of the fundamental elements of an improv acting rehearsal to create what I call “the improvised classroom.” In such a creative, collective space, students learn how to make use of the generation of ideas throughout their writing processes by observing, participating in, and reflecting on spontaneous attempts to solve problems.

The writing-as-a-process movement began as a revolution. In the 1960s, composition theorists began to transform the way that instructors conceived of and talked about writing in the classroom. Unlike the practices that made up what composition theorist Karen LeFevre calls the
"current-traditional paradigm" in her book *Invention as social act*, writing-as-a-process practices presented composition as a series of interconnected acts of writing through which an author moved on the way to producing a "final" draft (13). By contrast, the current-traditional paradigm, as process theorist Peter Elbow notes in his essay “The Shifting Relationship Between Speech and Writing,” presented writing as merely the transcription or recording of silent mental work completed by the student before he picked up his pen (286).

In *The Web of Meaning: Essays on Writing, Teaching, Learning, and Thinking*, Janet Emig, one of the forerunners of the writing-as-a-process movement, argues that the current-traditional view of composition suggests that "writing" was primarily an individual, internal process conducted by the student within the isolation of his own mind. From the perspective of the current-traditional paradigm, she asserts, “the student-writer uncomplexly sits down…completely formulates…what [he will write] in his head before writing a word, and then—observing a series of discrete locksteps in the left-to-right progression from planning to writing to revising, with no backsliding—builds a competent theme like a house of dominoes” (47). In this way, writing was not only conceived as primarily an event in the mind but, as process theorist Barriss Mills suggests in his transformative article, “Writing as Process,” it was often presented to students "in terms that...[were] static, atomistic, [and] non-functional” (19).

In re-presenting writing as a fluid, dynamic process, then, composition theorists sought to accomplish three objectives: to revise the notion of writing as a series of disconnected steps to be completed in a "left-to-right progression"; to re-cast the act of writing as the beginning, rather than the conclusion, of composition; and to dislodge instructors from the notion of a "correct" form of writing, one which their students invariably failed to create. Fundamentally, the first
process theorists blamed the rigidity of what Mills calls the “old method” for the poor quality of writing that students were producing in the mid-twentieth century (13). Writing in 1953, Mills, a process vanguard, detailed the steps of what he calls the "old method" of composition: "making a theme assignment, letting the student flounder alone through the process of writing it, and then triumphantly pointing out its many weaknesses" (25). For process theorists like Emig, this kind of instruction produced writing that was soulless, dull, and deadly. Indeed, she argues “one could say that the major kind of essay too many students have been taught to write in American schools is algorithmic, or so mechanical that a computer could readily be programmed to produce it” (70). Thus, one of the outcomes to which writing-as-a-process aspired was to create composition instructional practices that would allow students to produce writing that was more lively, engaging, and effective.

However, the revolutionary aura of the writing-as-a-process movement has faded, and contemporary composition instruction has fallen back into many of the mindsets that defined the teaching of writing before the 1970s. The terminology of process, once disruptive and potentially transformative, has become the language of the everyday discourse of composition. As composition theorist Richard Fulkerson observes in his article “Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century,” it is safe to say that "[a]ll composition perspectives assume some view of the writing process" (658). Indeed, for my generation of instructors—those who entered high school in the early 1990s—writing-as-a-process is the only method of composition instruction that we have ever known.

Despite the prevalence of the writing-as-a-process pedagogy in contemporary writing instruction, many of the students I encounter still believe that they should write with the goal of
getting it right the first time. Indeed, as composition theorist James Berlin observe, there is little agreement among composition teachers and theorists as to what kind of writing process students should be taught. As he observed in 1991, although "[e]veryone is teaching the process of writing…everyone does not teach the same process" (qtd. Fulkerson 669). It is this strange dichotomy that I find troubling: although many of my first-year composition students can talk about writing as a process, their writing practices reflect their perception that the objective of composing is the discrete production of a product that represents the “right” answer to a writing problem.

For example, many high school instructors, pressured by the omnipresence of high-stakes standardized testing, have trained their students to perform writing as a linear series of progressive steps: create a thesis statement, make an outline, and write the first and only draft. Such practices teach students that, in order to be successful on these kinds of time-limited writing tasks, they must complete their thinking process before they begin to compose; that is, they must write in order to get it right. They carry this perception with them into other writing tasks, even those that require them to participate in the writing process: to write multiple drafts, to get feedback from an audience, and to revise their work. Because many of our first-year students have learned how to write an essay in one sitting, they resist our attempts to engage them in the writing process as a whole. For these young writers, “writing” is the act of recording a series of completed thoughts, rather than tool with which to figure out what they really think.

What is particularly disquieting, however, is that the notion of writing as a process of getting it right is often presented to students using the language created by the writing-as-a-process movement. Students learn the stages of the writing process—prewriting/brainstorming,
drafting, revision, editing, proofreading, but they are often presented as discrete, disconnected activities. The “atomistic” instruction that Mills decried in 1953 is still wholly present in 2010. For example, the moniker of “prewriting” consigns spontaneous idea generation to the beginning of the writing process. The prefix “pre” serves to effectively isolate creative thinking to a space outside of the writing process and suggests to the student that there will be no need for her to generate ideas once she enters the writing process proper—a concept that misleads the student believe that she should cling to the first idea she chooses, even when she discovers that the idea doesn’t work in the context of her piece of writing.

I would argue that many first-year students cling to their strategy of writing to get it right because they believe that to do otherwise is to write in a way that is “wrong.” As Berthoff notes, composition “is a means of discovering what we want to say, as well as being the saying of it” (20). In order to determine what it is that she wants to say, a writer must not only generate ideas in the “prewriting” stage, she must also test them out in her own writing. It is inevitable, then, that a writer will encounter a series of “false starts, unfruitful beginnings, contradictions, and dead ends” as she discovers if her ideas will work in the context of a sp (22). Unfortunately, many of our first-year students see this kind of testing “as mistakes” rather than as, at Berthoff argues, “tentative steps, stages in a process” (22).

Further, I would argue that much composition instruction is designed to either tacitly or overtly support the notion that, as Elbow puts it, "the function of writing is to record what we have already decided—not to figure out whether we believe it” (“Shifting Relationship” 286). As post-secondary composition instructors, many of us take pride in ourselves as having moved beyond outdated, traditional models of writing, as we have embraced the presentation of
composition as a process. However, as Richard Fulkerson notes, there is a great deal of variation in the ways in which writing-as-a-process pedagogy is practiced (658). In many post-secondary classrooms, for example, the writing as a process of getting it right approach to composition continues to be taught using the language of writing-as-a-process, and many instructors continue to receive the kind of student writing that Emig describes as “surface scrapings” (46). As instructors, Emig argues, we get exactly the kind of writing that “we have asked for…if not explicitly by our statements, [then] implicitly by [our] acts and attitudes” within the classroom (46). Thus, we composition instructors must accept that high school English teachers are not wholly responsible for our students’ persistent belief that writing is the culmination of the thinking process, rather than its beginning.

In his essay “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience,” Elbow agrees with Emig’s assessment when he argues that students trained in this mindset tend to produce “a certain kind of ‘thin’ writing where the thought is insufficiently developed or where the language doesn’t really explain what the writing implies or gestures towards” (56). He notes that many instructors attribute the “thinness” of a student’s writing to her unwillingness to move beyond herself and to consider her audience as she composes. Gazing through what he calls “the Vygotskian lens,” however, Elbow argues that the primary failure of this kind of writing lies not in the writer's lack of consideration for her audience, but in her decision not to truly engage in self-reflective thinking. In such a case, “the writer’s explanation is too thin because she didn’t work out her train of thought fully enough for herself” [original emphasis] (56). A student's success as a writer, Elbow suggests, hinges upon her ability to actively engage in self-reflective thinking. Indeed, those “who have not learned the art of quiet, thoughtful, inner reflection, are
often unable to get much cognitive action going in their heads unless there are other people present to have action with." Rather than be able to generate ideas on their own, he argues, these writers “are dependent on live audience and the social dimension to get their discourse rolling or to get their thinking off the ground” (56).

As he acknowledges, Elbow’s reading is grounded in the work of child psychologist Lev Vygotsky. However, in his book *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky presents a model that both informs and complicates Elbow’s analysis. Vygotsky argues that children learn both language and thought patterns through their social interactions with others (35). As a child matures, she begins to internalize the social patterns of speech that she has observed and those in which she has participated. At the beginning of that internalization process, “egocentric speech,” or vocally expressed self-talk, “emerges when the child [first begins to] transfer…social, collaborative forms of behavior” to what Vygotsky calls “the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions” (35). Eventually, egocentric speech becomes a completely interiorized process, an "inner speech" wholly contained within the boundaries of the body (Vygotsky 29).

Given Vygotsky’s presentation of this process as a linear, evolutionary sequence, Elbow's dismissal of the "live audience" as a source for reflective thought is logical. However, Vygotsky's research also suggests that, like the writing process itself, our absorption of language and thought cannot be divided into discrete phases. Though he links each stage to a child's successive development, he notes that the content and purpose of each stage is essentially the same: to help the child to solve a problem or difficulty they've encountered (30).

I would suggest, then, that there are strong parallels between the core of Vygotsky’s theory of inner speech—that social, problem-solving discourse becomes internalized over time as
private dialogue—and the instructional opportunity with which we as first-year writing instructors are presented. In our composition classrooms, we are, in effect, teaching our students how to speak a new language and giving them the opportunity to engage with new kinds of thinking. However, there is no question that we as practitioners disagree over about the purpose and content of that new language; in the early twenty-first century, as Fulkerson observes, “there is a genuine controversy…within the field…over the goals of teaching writing in college. Are we teaching…[them] to write in order that they should become successful insiders? Or…so that they are more articulate critical outsiders?” [original emphasis removed] (679). Whatever our position on that question may be, there is also no doubt that the language we choose to teach in first-year writing is new to most of our students. If, as Vygotsky argues, "writing...represents an expansion of inner speech, that mode by which we talk to ourselves,” why do we expect our students to instantly be able to internalize this new vocabulary and incorporate it into their "inner speech" as soon as they enter the composition classroom? (qtd. Emig 127).

Rather than bemoaning those skills that they do not yet possess, I suggest that we are better served by acknowledging the paradoxical state in which our students come to us: they have been learned to write it right the first time, and yet they speak the speech of writing-as-a-process, to which the notion of a "correct" response was once anathema. I would argue that we must generate a creative response to our students’ reluctance to make what they see as mistakes in their writing and to truly embrace writing as thinking. As Elbow argues, writing can "be …[an] ideal medium for getting it wrong” [original emphasis] (“Shifting Relationships” 286) However, for many of our students, a draft is a textual space within which the instructor will point out their errors and correct their mistakes, not a tool with which to discover what it is they
truly think. As instructors, we must discover ways in which we can re-cast prewriting as an opportunity to create ideas and to test them, with the understanding that a writer repeats this creation-test-remake pattern throughout the writing process, and not just at its outset.

Convincing students that they must generate, test, and then revise their ideas throughout the writing process is made more difficult by the persistence of the notion that writing is a private, “solitary” act which a student must complete on her own (Elbow 290). As LeFevre notes, even instructors whose practices are informed by the writing-as-a-process paradigm continue to teach composition as process through which individual isolates herself from the external world in order to reflect solely upon her inner speech (13). I would argue, however, that to teach writing as the act of a single body in isolation is to ignore general critical acknowledgement that, as composition theorist Candice Spigelman argues in her book *Personally Speaking: Experience as Evidence in Academic Discourse*, “every writing is, to a greater or lesser extent, a rhetorical *performance*” [original emphasis] (49). Such an acknowledgement defines the writer’s role as that of a performer, and, by extension, defines the reader’s role as that of an audience that is external to the writer. This kind of interpersonal interaction, then, creates the kind of “social context” in which Berthoff argues that “language…[can] be realized” (72) and within which Vygotsky argues that language can be learned (35).

Thus, a writing classroom that actively rescues “prewriting” from the margins and practices it as a reoccurring element of the writing process can also be a collective space, one in which, as William Lutz suggests in his article “Making Freshman English a Happening,” student writers and the instructor are collaborators, co-makers of meaning within the same “the creative
experience” (37). As many educational researchers, such as Jacquelyn Baker-Sennett, Eduardo Maurana, and R. Keith Skinner, have noted, teaching practices informed by the principles and techniques of improv acting are uniquely suited to transforming the writing classroom into a creative and generative space. Likewise, scholars from other disciplines, like Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg, Jenn Fishman, and Andrea Lunsford, have noted how such practices can help students to become more open to and less intimidated by the process of generating ideas. However, my own experience as an improv actor and director suggests that improv techniques—specifically, the content and structure of an improv acting rehearsal—offer composition instructors an outline of new ways to teach writing as a creative process, whose success relies on a writer’s willingness to generate and test different combinations of meaning in order to locate those that “work.”

The beauty and the terror of improvisational acting—what makes audiences give performers more credit that we deserve—is that every performance appears to be a first and only draft. This is not so. Whenever an improv actor steps onto the stage, he is actively refashioning and rewriting past performances—both those in which he has performed and those he has observed—within the specific, spontaneous performance which the actor presents a live audience. Each individual improv performance is informed by an actor’s observations of both her own past performances and the audience’s response, and the performances of others and the reactions that those actors received from the audience.

The repetition of performance and observation creates a “re-enforcing cycle” not unlike the one between a writer and the text that she creates on the page (Emig 126). The juxtaposition
of the acting “process” and the “product” which it produces fashions a feedback loop between both the performer and an external audience and the performer and his or her internal audience. When she examines the feedback loop within the act of writing, Emig’s basic assumption is that, when faced with this record of their own thoughts, a student writer will be able to recognize the different ways in which their ideas are associated with or related to one another. I think they can, too, but I would argue that many first-year students cannot do so instinctively, especially after four years of practicing writing as a means by which to “get it right.” In fact, I would argue that approaching writing as an improvisational exercise can make room for tracking those associations.

There is, therefore, a need for the writing classroom to acknowledge both the presence and the utility of a “social construct” within the writing classroom; as Elbow observes, “Speech is usually social and communal, writing solitary. But we can make writing communal too by having people write together and to each other” (“Shifting Relationship” 290). I would argue that, in order to become successful practitioners of self-reflective thinking, first-year student writers at the college level need to be both shown and the opportunity to perform the ways in which this kind of mental-textual exchange can work. A familiar mantra of successful writing is “show, don’t tell”; in this case, we as instructors should take our own advice and show students how to recognize and make use of the feedback loop between the writer/reader and the text—to show students how this way of thinking/writing can work and how they as writers can do it. As rhetorician Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg suggests in Dramatizing Writing: Reincorporating Delivery in the Classroom, exposing students to and asking them to engage in “the verbal delivery of thought” allows them to “see and hear the writing process at work” (64).
In this work, I will propose a pedagogy that re-stages student writing as improvisation—a live, embodied activity in which students publicly create solutions, test them, discard them, and then try again. Sometimes, the only way to learn or discover what choice or idea will work in a piece of writing is through the process of negation, of elimination, by trying many alternatives to determine which is the most effective. An improv acting rehearsal suggests how the writing classroom might be re-arranged as a physical and imaginative space with boundaries within which student writers could make connections between ideas and receive immediate feedback from the instructor and an audience of their peers. Such a space—what I call the improvised classroom, would give students the opportunity to "put down words [and ideas] not as a commitment but as a trial...as play, jouissance, or the free play of language and consciousness." When writing is practiced as play, Elbow suggests, “thinking is enriched” (“Shifting 287).

This work, then, is my attempt to trace the boundaries and identify some of the possibilities of the improvised classroom. In Chapter I, I will examine the theoretical foundations for composition practices that recognize the ways in which humans’ ability to generate language and to make meaning are grounded in the body. In Chapter II, I will explore how the structure and content of an improv acting rehearsal information can help instructors to shape the boundaries of the improvised classroom. Finally, in Chapter III, I will begin to consider how the pedagogy of the improvised classroom can be realized in practice.
CHAPTER I: GROUNDING COMPOSITION

Since the rise of the writing-as-a-process movement, composition theorists and practitioners have shown great interest in restaging writing as an embodied, material practice, rather than simply an exchange of text between a reader and an absent author. Indeed, for the past 40 years, as Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, and their student co-authors note in “Performing Writing, Performing Literacy,” “performance has been irrepressible” in composition theory, “from the improvisational play of the process movement to the use of role-playing in writing classrooms, from the focus on writing for community service and activism to the focus on the social nature of all written communication” (228-299). However, despite the growing recognition of the essential connections between language and the body, the persistence of what Karen LeFevre calls “the Platonic view” of composition within writing-as-a-process pedagogy has kept the body outside of mainstream teaching practices.

LeFevre argues that composition instruction of this kind teaches students that a writer invents new ideas by “looking inward” and not by “interact[ing]…with a material or social world,” a world that, for Plato, is “illusory and unstable” (LeFevre 14). In Phaedo, Plato’s Socrates presents the body as a barrier to knowledge and as a pollutant that actively impedes man’s search for truth. He argues that man’s ability to gain knowledge is directly dependent on his ability to become dis-embodied. “While we live,” Socrates suggests “we shall be closest to knowledge if we refrain as much as possible from association with the body and do not join it with more than we must, if we are not infected with its nature but purify ourselves from it until the god himself frees us” (Plato 15). To “escape the body’s folly,” men must live a life of the mind, one in which the body is tolerated as a temporary nuisance (15). Embracing such practices,
Plato’s Socrates suggests, allows men to mold their bodies’ time on earth into an approximation of their souls’ lives after death: “those who practice philosophy in the right way are in training for dying and they fear death least of all men,” for they have lived their lives as “altogether estranged from the body and [marked instead by the] desire to have their soul by itself” (Plato 16). Thus, for a man to engage in meaningful and generative self-reflection, Plato suggests, he must distance himself from his body, and, by extension, from the social world within which her body exists.

Despite Plato’s desire, however, it is not possible to divorce the body from the study of writing and language. Indeed, the body itself is tied to humans’ ability to create language and to construct its meaning. As philosopher David Abram notes in his book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, the evolution of verbal expression and language represented humanity’s first organized attempts to organize, understand, and communicate the state of the world around them. To that end, “the earliest and most basic words…[took] shape from expletives uttered in startled response to powerful natural events, or from the frightened, stuttering mimesis of such events—like the crack and rumble of thunder across the sky” (Abram 76). In fashioning some kind of collective response to the unknown but ever-present natural phenomena that surrounded them, the bodies of early humans spontaneously became lightning rods, grounding their sensorial experiences of the natural world into improvised vocal expressions. For Abram, humanity’s capacity to channel its immediate, creative response to stimuli, a response spontaneously generated without conscious thought or planning, lies at the heart of spoken language.

Further, in his book *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word*, writing theorist and philosopher Walter Ong suggests that the study of writing must include an exploration of the
connections like those Abram identifies between the meaning of language and the way in which the body experiences that language. Indeed, Ong argues that the connections between writing and speech—the act of speaking or hearing a word—are fundamental to humans’ ability to assign meaning to words. Indeed, he asserts that these connections are so elemental that to “construct a logic of writing without investigation in depth of the orality out of which writing emerged and in which writing is permanently…grounded is to limit one’s understanding” (77).

Ong also suggests that the way in which we hear words spoken by others and the way in which we feel those words resonate within our own bodies is tied fundamentally to our ability to understand and interpret the meaning of those words: “[in] primary oral cultures, where the word has its existence only in sound, with no reference whatsoever to any visual perceptible text…the phenomenology of sound enters deeply into human beings’ feel for existence” (73). Further, Abram suggests that “[t]o overlook the power that words have to influence the body,” he argues, “and hence to modulate our sensory experience of the world[,]...is to render even the most mundane, communicative capacity of language incomprehensible” (89). At a basic level, then, the humans define the meaning of a word in part by the way in which the word feels, in one’s ear, for example, or in the mouth. That is, the body must be considered as an essential element of human communication, and it cannot be excised from our ability to create and negotiate meaning in language.

Another key component of the body’s role in communication is the material separation that it provides between what we recognize as our “selves” and the exterior world. As Ong observes, the body serves as a line of demarcation that helps us to determine what is us and what is not us: "[t]he body is a frontier between myself and everything else.” Humans use this material
delineation to define "[w]hat we mean by 'interior' and 'exterior,'" a concept that "can only be conveyed by reference to the experience of bodilessness" (73). The body is both a vessel with which we navigate through the exterior world and the vehicle through which we identify what is “us” and that which is not us. As our bodies move through the external world, we become engaged in what Abram calls "meeting[s], encounter[s], [and] participation" with the people, materials, and environments with which we interact (75). Indeed, for Abram, humans' ability to make and communicate meaning lies in our bodies’ negotiation of the "sensual dimension of experience," these collisions of our interior selves and the social and material world (74). He views this kind of meaning-making as instinctual behavior that lies in the body’s "native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole" (75). Our ability to "resonate" with our surroundings is grounded in our ability to distinguish what is "interior" to us—our selves—and what is "exterior"—not us. Thus, the body acts as the intermediary between the self and the external world, and, at a sensory level, it also helps us to determine the meanings of that distinction.

Although Abram argues that humans’ ability to make meaning at a sensory level is innate, Lev Vygotsky’s research suggests that we must learn how to translate that basic ability to resonate into higher order forms of social and self-communication. Central to this learning process is what Jean Piaget had, some years before Vygotsky’s work, dubbed "egocentric speech," or self-talk. In an egocentric speech act, a child engages in a vocalized conversation with himself as he attempts to solve a problem or difficulty that he has encountered” (31). In his earlier research, Jean Piaget had argued that the language a child produces in this scenario is "closer to a verbal dream than to a conscious activity," because speech “does not provide [for]
communication” with an audience external to the child’s self (qtd. Vygotsky 29). For Piaget, “[t]he primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact”; thus, he regarded speech that was not intended to engage another person as irrelevant (Vygotsky 35).

Conversely, Vygotsky’s own research suggests that an understanding of such speech is invaluable to the study of learning precisely because of its egocentric nature. Vygotsky re-staged several of Piaget’s original experiments with children, but “added a series of frustrations and difficulties” intended to stymie or complicate the children’s activity, such as removing a pad of paper when a child was ready to draw (29). Vygotsky observed that, when faced with such a difficulty, younger children would talk aloud to themselves—“Where’s the pencil? I need a blue pencil. Never mind, I’ll draw with the red one and wet it with water; it will become dark and look like blue”—and this self-centered speech as a means through which to work through the problem and locate a solution (29-30).

However, the researchers also noted that, when presented with a similar difficulty, the older children in their study were less likely to talk to themselves out loud. Instead, older children “scrutinized the problem, thought (which was indicated by long pauses), and found a solution” (30). When asked to share the content of her thoughts, Vygotsky discovered than an older child’s verbal response was akin to “the ‘thinking aloud’ of a preschooler” (30). That is, he found that even when an older child stops engaging in vocalized self-talk, she continues to make use of a kind of internalized egocentric speech. As the child matures, Vygotsky argues, the location of that speech shifts from the external, social world to inside of her interior self, making “[e]gocentric speech…actually an intermediate stage leading to inner speech” (33).
Thus, he asserts that children use egocentric speech not as an unconscious form of
escape, as Piaget suggests, but as “an instrument of thought in the proper sense” (31). For
Vygotsky, the conscious and purposeful nature of self-directed talk that his research identifies
suggests to him that Piaget’s theory of thought and language is backwards: the learning of
language and thought moves from the outside world into the child, not from the child into the
social sphere as Piaget had suggested. That is, a child learns how to talk to others—to negotiate
encounters with the world exterior to her self—before she learns how to talk to and think for
herself (35). Vocally expressed egocentric speech, then, is an intermediate step in the
developmental process and “emerges when the child transfers social, collaborative forms of
behavior to the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions…the child starts conversing with
himself as he has been doing all along with others” (35).

Taken together, the connections between language and the body and the evolution of
inner speech suggest that the act of writing—and the interiorized thinking it represents—can
itself be grounded in the body. Indeed, as rhetorical scholar Debra Hawhee observes in her
article, “Bodily Pedagogies: Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists’ Three Rs,’” the sophists
structured their pedagogy so as to underscore the ways in which the body and the mind were
connected the act of speech. Rhetoric's earliest practitioners and instructors regarded rhetoric
fundamentally as a “bodily art: an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as
well as the mind” (144). In the ancient gymnasium, speech and sport were practices within the
same space, and this “spatial intermingling” reinforced the connection between language and the
body (144). The instructors in the gymnasiums taught their students how to read the bodies of
trained rhetors and to identify those “desirable qualities” of “deportment, carriage, [and] bodily
movement” that the rhetor possessed (158). Students were trained to visually recognize their teachers’ embodiment of these qualities and then to repeatedly enact those same qualities themselves (158).

As Hawhee observes, the key to the success of this training method was a dualistic kind of repetition: students repeatedly observed the desired bodily comportment in their instructors and repeatedly used their own bodies to perform these same qualities. “This manner of learning-doing,” she argues, “entails ‘getting a feel for’ the work—following and producing a rhythm…Entwined within the body in this way, rhetorical training thus exceeds the transmission of ‘ideas,’ [and] rhetoric the bounds of ‘words’” (160). In this way, the sophists’ pedagogical practices reflected their recognition of the fundamental of the connections between the body, language, and rhetoric.

Some centuries later, the sophistic recognition of the body as a partner in communication became so magnified that the body, rather than the content of an act of speech, came to dominate the popular conception of rhetoric. In the eighteenth century, the elocutionary movement in the United States fostered intense popular interest in the kind of public speechmaking in which “excellence in delivery could make up for all deficiencies in invention, arrangement, and style” (Skinner-Linnenberg 12). In these public, rhetorical acts, an audience valued a rhetor not because of the content of his speech, or the clever construction of his argument, but because of the way in which he embodied his words.

In the nineteenth century, many teachers of rhetoric engaged in a zealous attempt to distance both themselves and their art from the bodily excesses of the elocutionary movement pushed the pedagogical pendulum as far from the roots of their art as had the elocutionists. By
the mid-1800’s, a growing number of rhetoricians believed that pedagogy centered upon the body “no longer met the needs of the students being training in written literacy” (Skinner-Linnenberg 18). Fundamentally, many of the rhetoricians of this period “did not consider delivery to be [with]in their domain” and consciously restaged rhetoric within their classrooms as a “written discourse,” demoting delivery to “an ancillary art” (19). As Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, and their co-authors note, this re-vision of rhetoric in the nineteenth century “obliterated the body and performance from critical view,” and “shift[ed]…attention away from oral and embodied delivery to textual production of the printed page” (228). These decisions effectively excised the body from rhetorical instruction for the next century.

However, as Fishman and Lunsford argue, the body could not be completely exorcised from composition; indeed, the notion of the writer’s body as a figure in performance have has, “over the last forty years, haunted work in rhetoric and composition” (228). They suggest that, since the 1960’s, “performance has been irrepressible” in composition theory and practice, “from the improvisational place of the process movement to the use of role-playing in writing classrooms, from the focus on writing for community service and activism to the focus on the social nature of all written communication” (228-229). The rise of the process movement, then, generated a new interest in acknowledging and exploring the body’s role in the act of writing.

That renewed interest alone has not been enough to move the body back into mainstream composition pedagogy. In his essays "The Shifting Relationship Between Speech and Writing” and “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience,” Peter Elbow illustrates how the desire to read writing as a private and disembodied act continues to influence process pedagogy. In “Shifting Relationships,” Elbow argues that “speech” and “writing” occupy
opposite ends of the writing process: he defines “speech” as thinking that is happening in real time and “writing” as a reflection of a thought process which has already been completed (298). He makes an impassioned case that what he calls “private writing,” or the act of talking to one’s self on paper, must be injected into the process as an intermediary between speech and writing. In this step, which mirrors the process that Elbow will later dub “freewriting,” a writer allows the ideas to flow onto the page, with no regard for their “rightness”—indeed, with the recognition that there is much to be gained in getting it “wrong” on paper (286). He argues that private writing provides “a way to unleash some cognitive savagery—which is often lacking in a ‘literate’ world too often lulled into thinking that picking up a pencil means planning and trying to get things right” (290).

For Elbow, a writer lets this kind of savagery loose by engaging in the process of what he describes in his essay “Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience” as “freewriting.” Unlike traditional prewriting activities, in which a writer engages specifically to create a product of ideas to which he can refer back, a writer engaged in freewriting does not “particularly plan to come back and read” what she has written. Rather, she “write[s] along and the written product falls away to be ignored,” leaving only what Elbow calls the “‘real product’—any new perceptions, thoughts or feelings produced in the mind by the freewriting” (63). The purpose of freewriting, then, is to “follow…discourse in hopes of getting somewhere,” rather than generating a discrete list of ideas that the writer can immediately use to address an assignment or project (63). In this way, his work reinforces Berthoff’s assertion that, in teaching pre-writing, the writing instructor is not “teaching… how to get a thesis statement,” but is instead teaching the student about the “generation and uses of chaos” (70).
For Elbow, the shallow and uncritical nature of student writing can be directly attributed to the stifling of students’ natural ability to access what he sees as fundamental creative forces. The conditions that gave rise to the spontaneous and generative thought that characterized the beginnings of language, he argues, can be replicated only in isolation from the external world, in the interspace that a writer fashions between her mind, the act of writing, and her text (299). In essence, Elbow favors creating a mental and cognitive space in which the writer’s own thoughts provide “the crack and rumble of thunder” to which the writer-savage allows herself to give a series of “startled responses” (Abram 76). Further, such private writing encourages “people [to] produce language as they are engaged in the mental event it expresses” (299) rather than crafting a text that serves only as “the record of completed mental events” (298). Thus, Elbow argues that we as writers locate our “cognitive savagery” by going deep within ourselves, by engaging in reflective thinking that cycles between the mind and the page. Unlike the ancients that Abram describes, Elbow believes that, in order to locate provocation or inspiration within themselves, student writers must isolate themselves from the social and material world and engage in private, reflective thought.

In “The Shifting Relationship Between Speech and Writing,” Elbow briefly contemplates the connections between the body, which he associates with speech, and the kind of creative savagery that he advocates. At first, he praises what he calls the “open” quality of speech and its ability to embody and inform “live thinking” (290). Indeed, Elbow argues that humans’ ability to “experience the meaning more” in speech than in writing arises from our recognition that “in listening to speech we are hearing mental activity going on—live; [while, by contrast,] in reading a text we are only encountering the record of completed mental events” (298). However, Elbow
is discomfited by what he presents as the strange paradox of speech, a medium that he sees as both ephemeral and “indelible” (284). From his perspective, spoken words are intangible and illusory, “waves of temporarily squashed air…that begin at once to…lose their sound” (283), yet they are also more “vivid” than written text—for “[w]hen we speak, listeners don’t just see our words, they see us” [emphasis added] (286)

Despite the fleeting nature of speech, Elbow asserts that the speaker’s body remains wholly, inescapably present during speech, even as the sounds that he generates vanish. Though he acknowledges the human body’s unique ability to resonate with other bodies—and the body’s fundamental connections to language and meaning—it is precisely this quality that leads him to reject speech as an effective mode of self-reflection. Ultimately, he argues that oral speech, “being a social medium, seldom leads us to the conceptual wilderness,” a space that he positions within an individual’s own mind and body (290). That is, oral speech is dependent upon the body’s ability to reverberate off other bodies, but this reverberation, Elbow argues, directly interferes with an individual’s ability to engage in uninhibited self-reflective thinking. Therefore, a writer who relies on social dialogue or spoken self-talk is less mature than one who can generate ideas by herself, either through inner speech or writing.

However, for Elbow, a writer must not only attempt to detach herself from the ever-presence of her own body, but she must also isolate herself from her awareness that an external audience even exists. In “Closing My Eyes as I Speak,” Elbow suggests that, in the early stages of writing, an author should “ignore…[her] audience all together”; rather, at the beginning of the writing process, we should “direct our words only to ourselves or to no one in particular” (52). Alternatively, he argues, a writer might “direct [her] words” to “the ‘wrong’ audience, that is, to
an inviting audience of trusted friends or allies” (52). In this way, a writer prevents the “right”
audience from seeing her/her text until the process of writing (which Elbow regards as distinct
from private writing-as-inner speech) is complete. She thus ensures that the right audience sees
the final product of writing, and not the generative process which made that product possible.
For Elbow, “the ability to turn off audience awareness—especially when it confuses thinking or
blocks discourse—is also a ‘higher’ skill,” one that only a mature writer can achieve (56). He
defines this skill, this ability to generate an absence of awareness, as “an ability that tends to
require learning, growth, and psychological development,” such as the self-reflective thinking
evolution defined by Vygotsky (56).

Further, in “Closing My Eyes,” as in “The Shifting Relationship Between Speech and
Writing,” Elbow continues to be discomfited by what he sees as the distracting presence of the
writer’s body. He argues a writer who is overly aware of his audience is reminiscent of “the
ineffective actor whose consciousness of self distracts us: he makes us too aware of his own
awareness of us” (54). By contrast, he compares “truly good writing” to “the performance of the
actor who has managed to stop attracting attention to her awareness of the audience watching
her” (54). For Elbow, it is the writer’s hyperawareness that he is being observed—that his
audience can see him, and will be critical of him if he makes a mistake—that prevents him from
taking chances, from recognizing the full potential of private writing-as-thinking. As Robert
Brooke and John Hendricks observe in their book, Audience Expectations and Teacher
Demands, students are very aware that the “right” audience for whom they are writing is usually
the instructor herself (xv). Elbow argues that, if a writer allows herself to be aware of that
audience, of the presence of the instructor, he may leave his nascent ideas vulnerable to the
audience’s undue influence and find himself unable to access the necessary inner depths of cognitive savagery (51).

The assumption that underlies Elbow’s argument is that student writers know how to engage in a productive conversation with their inner speech, and can record that conversation on paper, if given sufficient time and the solitude. While this assumption is not unreasonable, I would argue that it is not representative of many twenty-first century first-year students. When they arrive in the first-year writing classroom, many students are practiced in the art of regurgitating the kind of language that they think that the “right” audience—the instructor—wants to hear. They have effectively absorbed the echoes of academic writing and they think they know what such writing should sound like because there’s only one “correct” answer. They have become skilled at contorting their own writing to match the pleasing tones that they think the “right” audience wants to hear.

I agree with Elbow’s assertion that the writings of many students suggest that they are unable or unwilling to engage in meaningful, self-reflective thinking. In my classroom, I have seen this absence of meaningful self-talk manifest itself in two distinct ways. First, some of my students have become convinced by their secondary educational experience that they know how to “do” writing that they perceive as academic in nature; thus, there is nothing that they need to learn from a first-year composition course. Often, these students have become accustomed to earning an “A” for writing that they complete at the last minute, with no time—or need—for serious reflective thinking. Students like these are not aware of that absence, nor do they understand why it’s necessary for them to engage in it—until the first time they earn a lower grade than they expected.
In the aftermath of that disappointing grade, some students come to recognize what’s missing in their work is not the presence of what Berthoff sarcastically dubs a “subskill” like proper comma usage or paragraph construction (25). Rather, their writing is marked by an absence of substantive thinking in which the writer moves beyond the surface and truly engages with the material at hand. One of my composition students at a community college became sullen and withdrawn after she earned “C’s” on a string of assignments, after earning high marks earlier in the term. In her scathing midterm evaluation of my course, I discovered that she was furious with me because I was “giving” her grades lower than she was used to receiving without providing what she felt was sufficient explanation about what she was doing “wrong.” However, the problem in each of these pieces was essentially the same: she skated over the surface of the material, and it was apparent that she’d spent little time thinking through her response. Over time, she reluctantly came recognize that the one-and-done strategy that she’d used to earn A’s in her high school writing classes would not produce the same results in college. On her final course evaluation, she indicated that she’d learned that she needed to write multiple drafts not just to fulfill the requirements of an assignment but in order to figure out what she really thought. She noted that she now spends more time revising and editing her work than she does “writing.”

I have also worked with other students who were quite cognizant of their inability to think deeply and locate answers or ideas within their own minds. Often, these are the same students who tell me that they know they’re “not good writers” because they can’t figure out what they think in isolation. As LeFevre observes, they have been inculcated in the notion “that invention is supposed to be a solitary act,” and, therefore, “they may feel that if they have difficulty inventing in some situations they have only themselves to blame. Something must be
wrong inside them” (26). One of my students at a private four-year institution calmly informed me that her draft was poorly organized because she was a “bad writer.” When pressed, she indicated that she was “bad” because she sometimes had trouble figuring out what she was thinking if she didn’t say it out loud; a “good” writer, she implied, would just know what she thought. She pointed to an idea that she’d mentioned during a recent oral presentation: I didn’t realize I thought that until I said it out loud, she said.

I also agree with Elbow’s reiteration of the notion that writing can foster thinking. However, I would argue that the medium that he presents as the solution—freewriting and other prewriting activities on their own—do not provide a sufficient response to the problem. Rather, I suggest that we as composition instructors need to revise our notions of “prewriting” and introduce it to our students as a generation and testing of ideas that occurs in different forms throughout the writing process, not just at its outset. This revision of prewriting forms the foundation of the pedagogy of what I call the improvised classroom, a bounded, creative space in which the act of writing is recast as a rehearsal, rather than a formal performance.

The revision of prewriting is fostered through classroom activities and writing assignments that are designed around Vygotsky’s theory that language learning is an outside-in process, one which moves from social discussion, to egocentric speech, to inner, reflective speech. I would argue, however, that there is less value in constructing the course as a progression towards the explicit goal of teaching students how to engage in productive conversations with their own inner speech than in reading Vygotsky’s stages as a process, rather than a progression. As Ann Berthoff argues, the steps in the writing process “are not distinct: they are dialectical; they are not on again-off again” (25). Similarly, within the improvised
classroom, the evolution of self-reflective thinking skills is regarded as a fluid process through which learners can move forwards, backwards, or sideways. In this way, the motto of the improvisational classroom might be, in the words of science-fiction stalwart Doctor Who: “First things first, but not necessarily in that order.”

In Chapter II of this work, I will examine some of the ways in which theorists and practitioners have been inspired by improvisational acting to create new classroom practices. Then I will explore how the structure and content of an improv acting rehearsal information can help instructors to shape the boundaries of the improvised classroom.
CHAPTER II: SKETCHING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE IMPROVISED CLASSROOM

Improvisational acting has long been a source of inspiration and innovation in the practice of classroom teaching. There has been much discussion in education theory in particular about the merits of an "improvisational" approach to teaching. As educational theorist R. Keith Sawyer observes in his article, “Improvised Lessons: Collaborative Discussion in the Constructivist Classroom,” pedagogical approaches inspired by improv are closely tied to teaching practices grounded in social constructivist theory (290). These practices deemphasize the instructor's authority and encourage students to become active agents in their own learning. The connection between social constructivist pedagogy and improvisation this connection is a logical one, for, as Sawyer observes, "[c]onstructivist teaching is fundamentally improvisational, because if the classroom is scripted and overly directed by the teacher, the students cannot co-construct their own knowledge" ("Improvised Lessons” 190). Indeed, this reimagining of the instructor as a co-creator, rather than the dictator, of learning is fundamental to improvisational acting.

In her book Improvisation for the Theater, Viola Spolin, the director and acting teacher credited with establishing the tradition of improv in the United States, argues that an improv director, unlike the traditional theatre director, should see her task as "giving problems to solve problems," rather than as one of presenting students with a problem and expecting them to locate the single, "correct" solution [original emphasis removed] (20). The value of such a collaborative environment, she asserts, is that it "does away with the need for the teacher to analyze, intellectualize, [or] dissect a student's work on a personal basis" and makes it unnecessary for "the student to go through the teacher...to learn" (20). In this way, Spolin suggests, students are
afforded the opportunity to create their own knowledge, rather than to serve as passive receivers of information. The classroom becomes a unique space that is constructed by each set of learners, rather than a space dominated by the presence of an educational authority.

   Educational researchers have also observed the influence of "improvisation" in teaching practices that, on the surface, are not overtly theatrical in nature (Sawyer, "Improvised Lessons" 190). Indeed, in their article “School ‘Performance’: Improvisational Processes in Development and Education,” education theorists Jacquelyn Baker-Sennett and Eugene Matusov argue that all instructors who base their classroom practices on interactivity, rather than on lecture, should be considered "improvising performers" (205). These instructors, they suggest, are "[l]ike improvisational actors" who go onstage "with a set of guiding principles rather than a written script.” The authors argue that one advantage of an improvisational approach to teaching is that it allows instructors to respond kairotically to the classroom environment on a given day, rather than imposing a pre-determined plan on an unwilling audience. Instructors who use these methods are better prepared to respond when, inevitably, “unpredictability occurs” within the classroom (205).

   Indeed, Sawyer regards the parallels between effective teaching and successful improvisation as so strong that he suggests that teacher education programs should integrate improvisational techniques into their classrooms. In his article, “The Improvisational Performance of Everyday Life,” he argues that such an integration is logical in part because instructors, like all humans, use such improvisational skills daily to navigate conversations that we hold with others. "Because we don’t have a script for our conversations," Sawyer observes, "we have to improvise our lines" in almost any interaction with others ("Improvisational").
Despite our ability to perform these "everyday improvisations," many instructors are reluctant to give up their traditional control over classroom activities ("Improvisational"). As Sawyer notes, even instructors who adopt a social constructivist approach can find themselves overtly steering classroom conversation towards a predetermined point or idea. However, educational research suggests that an "effective constructivist discussion" occurs when "the topic and the flow of the class emerge from teacher and student together" ("Improvised Lessons" 189). Thus, Sawyer argues, "[p]roviding improvisational training for teachers might help" instructors to realize the potential of social constructivist practice by teaching "them to more effectively create their own improvised lessons" ("Improvised Lessons" 200).

Though not explicitly informed by improv acting techniques, William Lutz’s transformation of his first-year writing classrooms into “Happenings” during the 1970s embodies the creative and chaotic spirit of improvisation. In his article “Making Freshman English as a Happening,” Lutz suggests that “[o]ne way to approach writing as a creative process is to make the classroom experience a Happening: structure in unstructure; a random series of ordered events; order in chaos; the logical illogicality of dreams” (35). To do this, Lutz argues, will require a fundamental transformation of the course’s content, the environment of the classroom, and the nature of in-class activities. The purpose of these alterations, he argues, is to change the nature of the writing that he asks his students to do.

For Lutz, the key to staging composition as a Happening is “to make the student respond directly to his own experience and not someone else's” (36). He argues that creating a classroom which is, in itself, an experience, gives students the opportunity to have a series of encounter that are uniquely their own. For example, Lutz describes an in-class activity in which he “gave each
student an index card and instructed him not to read it until told to. Then, at a given signal, each 
student read his card and performed the activity described on it” (36-37). Though each of the 
activities was distinct, all of the activities required the students to use their bodies in some way: 
to enact an object, a create state of being, or to complete a series of repetitive movements.

For instance, one student’s card instructed him to “[l]ook at your feet but don't ever move 
them or look up or anywhere else in the room”; another was asked to “[g]ently tap your forehead 
against your desk. Keep doing this without looking around.” Others were required to perform 
tasks that involved interacting with other students: “Walk around to everyone in the room and 
pat him or her on the back lightly and say, ‘It's all right.’ Stop occasionally and say, ‘Who, me?’” 
(37). Once the activity’s three-minute time period had elapsed, the students wrote about their 
experiences. As each had participated in the activity “in a different way,” each student’s 
experience of those three minutes was unique. Thus, although all of the students had engaged in 
the same general activity at the same time and within the same space, each of the pieces of 
writing that emerged from the exercise was also unique (37).

However, despite the unique promise of Lutz’s practices, their distinctiveness, coupled 
with the radical rewriting of the composition classroom that they required, prevented his 
performative pedagogy from moving into the mainstream of composition theory and practice. In 
his book, *English Composition as a Happening*, composition theorist Geoffrey Sirc identifies the 
mainstream rejection of practices like Lutz’s in the 1970s as a critical and creative error in 
composition theory. He argues that composition theorists, like their more established 
counterparts in other disciplines, value the repetition of old ideas, rather than the generation of 
new ones; writing classrooms, then, have become what he calls “Museums…in which students
are ‘invited’ in to sample the best that has been thought and expressed in our language and... to learn to reproduce the master’s craft.” In choosing to follow this path, Sirc argues, composition theory has sacrificed the generative potential of more radical practices in order to establish itself as a legitimate discipline within the university (2).

In recent years, however, two publications have explored ways in which practices that are inspired by improvisation can benefit students within the composition classroom. In her book, *Dramatizing Writing: Reincorporating Delivery in the Classroom*, Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg’s presentation of improvisation highlights its usefulness as a generator of texts; she values improv as one more method that students can use to generate well-crafted written texts; “[a]fter all,” she notes, “this creative activity [improv] is designed to lead to a polished essay.” She argues that emphasizing delivery as part of rhetoric also gives students opportunities to try out their ideas before an audience of their peers (70). She attributes the absence of this kind of emphasis in current composition theory to what she calls “a contemporary bias against delivery in writing” that “has led theorists to overlook” delivery (xi), thus “leaving a hole that...[she] believes has constricted writing theory” (33).

Skinner-Linnenberg acknowledges that the notion of “dramatizing writing” is not new. However, she distinguishes herself from her predecessors by creating a new definition of delivery that is specific to the composition classroom; delivery, she argues, is “the use of noetic and physical processes by which students can convey their ideas/life experiences to their peer audiences in an effort to develop the best writing they can achieve” (55). She asserts that the use of such an approach, she argues, transforms writing from a solitary activity into an embodied,
“dramatized” act that is staged as part of an ongoing conversation between writers and their peer audience (56).

As a process of creation and revision, Skinner-Linnenberg’s version of improv is more embodied than traditional text-based brainstorming techniques or a revision based on reader-response. She provides instructors with an extensive catalog of activities that allow students to use either their body or their voice to engage in delivery. However, she is most interested in a series of activities that integrate both body and voice, or ask the student to engage in what she calls a “full physical performance” (69). She bases a whole series of these fully-integrated activities on the principles of improvisational acting, focusing specifically on the use of improv techniques in the generation of ideas and in their revision, based on an audience’s response (69). Ultimately, she argues that “[i]mprovisations are excellent tools for brainstorming new ideas, making revisions, and for employing full physical performance in the writing classroom” (69).

Like Skinner-Linnenberg, Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, and their two student co-authors identify enacted performance as “a tool for innovation” within composition theory. In their article, “Performing Writing, Performing Literacy,” Fishman and Lunsford examine the “live, scripted, and embodied activities” that students “stage outside of the classroom,” basing their work on contemporary performance studies by way of composition theory (226). From this perspective, the authors identify a second potential value in restaging composition: they cite performance’s “potential [as a] vehicle for helping students to transfer literacy skills from situation to situation” (227). That is, their findings suggest that students can inform their study of writing with the energetic and creative potential they embody in their performances outside of
the classroom, allowing them to bridge both the transition from high school to college and their lives beyond the classroom to their identities as scholars (227).

To realize this potential, however, the authors acknowledge that they “and others need to define a rhetoric (or several rhetorics) of performance” (246). The authors echo Skinner-Linnenberg when they note that they also need to “pay more attention to the fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery” (246). As they consider the construction of a rhetoric of performance, Fishman and Lunsford, like Skinner-Linnenberg a decade earlier, see great promise in improv acting techniques. At the end of their article, the authors specifically laud Spolin’s foundational text, *Improvisation for the Theater*, briefly sketching what they see as the “myriad possibilities” that the text holds “for new lessons in some of writing and literacy’s most important concepts” (247).

Taken together, these two contemporary examinations of performance in the writing classroom suggest that composition instructional practices informed by improv acting techniques can provide two key values to students. First, as Skinner-Linnenberg suggests, improv acting techniques and games offer models for enacted brainstorming or prewriting exercises. In the writing classroom, instructors can use these exercises both to inspire the rapid generation of ideas and as a springboard for discussions about revisions. Although Fishman and Lunsford make note of this potential, they also suggest that teaching practices grounded in performance may help students to make the transition between high school and college; students who come to college with some experience in performance outside of school—in poetry slams, for example, or in theatre—can use plug their performative abilities directly into a writing classroom informed by performance techniques. Though they approach the problem from distinct positions—
Skinner-Linnenberg as a rhetorician and Fishman and Lunsford as performance studies theorists by way of composition—both studies highlight the rich and innovative possibilities that improvisation offers to the teaching of writing, particularly for first-year writing students and their instructors.

The possibilities of improv-informed teaching practices, and the potential that they hold for students and for teachers, are well documented. Specifically, each of these studies examined in this section highlights the kind of spontaneous thinking, action, and response that improv acting requires. What I would argue, then, is that these studies lay the foundation for the improvised classroom as a space of generative and creative thinking for both the students and the instructor. In the next section, I will examine some of the contradictory ways in which we present the purpose of “prewriting” to our students, and note some of the effects that these contradictions can have upon students’ writing.

*Filling “The Empty Space”*

Despite the flurry of “prewriting” exercises like bubble diagrams, and journaling activities that we foist on our students—or perhaps because of them—much of the writing generated by our first-year writing students is lifeless, bereft of both of energy and of critical thought. As Ann Berthoff observes, “Pre-writing is on everybody’s lips, but I see little evidence that people understand that ‘pre-writing’ is *writing*” (24). Indeed, for many of our students, prewriting has become a hurdle that they must overcome, rather than a space to spontaneously create ideas: “[i]n the manual that one writing lab put out for tutors, in a section called ‘Pre-writing,’ I read that the best thing to do if a freshman has trouble organizing…is to teach him to
outline!” (24). In this way, many of our students have come to understand that “brainstorming” is akin to mapping our your thoughts before you’ve conducted your thinking; some cling to a former teacher’s insistence that one should not put pen to paper “until you know what you want to say” (Berthoff 3).

By contrast, other students are certain that, in order to be a successful conversant in the academic discourse community, they must stifle or even suffocate any words, phrases, or ideas that, to them, do not sound “academic.” As Barriss Mills suggests, these students have been trained by “teachers [who] still behave as though all student writing should be done in language appropriate for negotiating with deans” (21). These young writers internally self-edit with such vigor that by the time they put pencil to paper or fingers to keyboard, they are engulfed in a self-generated case of writer’s block. George Schiller calls this self-muzzling creature a “watcher at the gates of the mind’ who examines ideas too closely” (qtd Johnstone 79).

Students who are in the thrall of the watcher are, at times, so self-reflective in their thinking that they burn their ideas to ashes before they make it to the page. By the time they sit down to write—often at the last minute— they have expelled so much energy attempting to determine what it is that we as instructors want from them that they have little energy for and no interest in allowing themselves to discover their own take on the topic. Faced with this conundrum, first-year students, if left to their own devices, often avoid prewriting activities like brainstorming or freewriting and jump straight into creating their first and final draft.

I would argue that one result of these contradictory messages about prewriting—presented both a creative space and one in which you have to “get it right”—encourages what I call, borrowing Peter Brook’s term, “deadly writing.” In his book *The Empty Space*, Brook, a
renowned and innovative theatre director, argues that contemporary theatre (as of the late 1960s) is plagued by productions that are what he dubs “deadly” in nature. A production becomes deadly, he suggests, when it “approach[es]…the classics [of drama] from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done” (14). In a deadly production, the conversation between the company and the play’s text is already completed before the first rehearsal begins. That is, the company does not begin their work by engaging in a new conversation with the play; rather, they transform the production a sort of spiritual séance, a re-production of what they have determined is the “correct” interpretation and presentation of the work.

Within such a production, the actors, the designers, and the director do not challenge themselves to make many creative choices, relying instead on the tropes established by a long-dead canonical production. Many companies re-create a production that, in its original form, may have been alive with discovery. However, constant repetition of those production choices, so far removed from the kairotic context in which they were made, has killed what was once lively and diminished what was once unique into a dull trope. Thus, Brook argues, productions that re-produce rather than create make for an evening of boring, deadly theatre (14).

Interestingly, for Brook, “deadly” theatre is an entity that is often distinct from theatre that is “bad.” To the contrary, Brook observes that productions he considers deadly are often financially and critically successful, despite what he perceives as their utter lack of life (11). He dryly notes that many such performances are marked by “historical costumes and long speeches,” and that it is those plays culturally recognized as classics—those by Shakespeare and Moliere, for example—that seem so often to suffer from this living death. Over time, audiences come to
associate such performances of high culture with “a certain sense of duty…and the sensation of being bored.” Indeed, if they aren’t bored just the right amount by a production of one of Shakespeare’s plays, then an audience comes to believe that the production is doing something wrong. Thus, Brook asserts, audiences have come to associate “just the right degree of boringness” with productions that a lifetime of deadly theatre has trained them to recognize as a “worthwhile” cultural event (11).

For composition instructors, Brook’s definition of creative production that is “deadly” brings to mind many pieces of student writing that possessed this same quality: they reek of reproduction and are hobbled by their lack of creativity. I suggest that deadly writing such as this begins with the notion that there is a right answer out there to the assignment, and that all the student need do is locate it—whether on his own or with us dragging him to the exact location from which we wish him to speak.

As instructors, our desire for a “correct” response does not have to be overtly expressed to have an effect our students’ writing. Rather, as Karen LeFevre observes, we can covertly transmit our desire for a “correct” response through “the structure of assignments, courses, and methods of evaluation” (13). Indeed, this notion of writing as a search for a “right” answer—whether it is overtly or covertly stated—has a very real effect upon the kinds of writing that our students choose to produce. As Ann Bogart, co-founder of the SITI Company, and Tina Landau, director and playwright with Steppenwolf Theatre, note, this attitude squashes creativity and “encourages artists to search for a single satisfying choice, driven by seeking approval from an absolute authority above them” (18).
In his book *Impro*, improv director and theorist Keith Johnstone examines how
destructive, rather than constructive, this attitude towards writing can be. Johnstone recalls that
his instructors emphasized the inferiority of their students’ writing by dissecting classic poems
“to show how difficult ‘real’ writing was.” Fundamentally, this instruction centered upon the
notion that “real” writers “should always know where the writing was taking” them, and that
student writers should constantly seek out “better and better ideas.” To Johnstone, his instructors
“spoke as if an image like ‘the multitudinous seas incarnadine’ could have been worked out like
the clue to a crossword puzzle. Their idea of the ‘correct’ choice was the one anyone would have
made if he had thought long enough” (79).

The improvised classroom, by contrast, is designed to foster writing that has more in
common with the noisy humanity of what Brook describes as “rough theatre.” In contrast to
theatre that is deadly, “[t]he Rough Theatre has apparently no style, no conventions, no
limitations—in practice, it has all three.” Rather than playing to a historical idea of what a certain
play should look like or feel like on stage, rough theatre is very much of the present; it “deals
with men’s actions…it is down to earth and direct…it admits wickedness and laughter” (Brook
71). Thus, assignments and activities within the improvised classroom begin with an
acknowledgement of the here and now, of the body’s ability to observe the environment in which
it rests, and then to use those observations—be they of place, people, or texts—to create new
meanings. To do this, the inhabitants of the improvised classroom must be willing to listen,
speak, and react to their thoughts as they occur, to recognize writing as a “live” process, both in
social settings and within the interior of their own minds.
CHAPTER III: THE IMPROVISED CLASSROOM IN PRACTICE

The improvised classroom creates opportunities for composition students to generate and test ideas in collaboration with the instructor and their classmates. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the structure of an improv acting rehearsal suggests how a composition instructor can reposition herself as a student’s collaborator and reformulator, rather than solely the student’s assessor. I will then explore how the students themselves can be taught to act together as co-creators of meaning and to perform as an informed, invested, and critical audience of both their peers’ work and their own.

The Instructor as Reformulator

As many researchers and instructors have noted, improvisational acting provides a wealth of strategies and practices that writing teachers can use to teach spontaneity in the writing classroom. Fundamentally, the primary benefit of incorporating improv techniques into the writing classroom is their utility for enlivening prewriting activities. Unlike traditional brainstorming or prewriting activities, improv acting is perceived as “the kind of play that young children engage in—that of reacting to something that happens in a spontaneous fashion, without self-consciousness, judgment or hesitation” (Bogart and Landau 209). Where the writing-as-a-process language of prewriting has worn thin, then, improv offers a new vocabulary, indeed a new “rhetoric of performance” for the composition classroom (Fishman et al 247).

For example, in “Performing Writing, Performing Literacy,” student co-author Beth McGregor discusses how she uses the improv principle of “accepting all offers” to find her own “way around writer’s block by granting herself permission to keep going [with her academic
writing], if only provisionally” (243). For Beth, re-casting “brainstorming” as an improvisational acting exercise allowed her to overcome the hesitancy that had marked her prewriting activities; in essence, this change in vocabulary, and the associations that accompanied it, allowed her to overpower the “watcher at the gates” (Schiller qtd. Johnstone 79).

In the improvised classroom, then, I would suggest that the instructor herself must model spontaneous thinking and its potential generative effects. In so doing, the instructor must also perform the possibilities of that lie in making “mistakes”; that is, through her interactions with students, she must demonstrate that making mistakes is part of spontaneous thinking. In essence, she must be willing to fail in public. In the improvised classroom, the composition instructor is re-cast as a figure of imagination and co-creation. In order to become a true collaborator, a teacher must students were not shown what writing could do, what their writing could do, in the right kairotic circumstances. This, Barriss Mills asserts, should be one of an instructor’s primary goals: teachers must help students to develop “a genuine awareness of and interest in the way words work in communication” (24).

As Keith Johnstone argues, “[s]tudents need a ‘guru’ who ‘gives permission’ to allow forbidden thoughts into their consciousness” (84). Informing the student that it’s ok for him to bring out the “cognitive savage” is not sufficient, for his high school experience may have taught him that he should not or need not creatively or critically engage with his writing; as Johnstone notes, when some students are asked “to do something spontaneous[,] they react as if they’ve been asked to do something indecent” (47). For Johnstone, this reluctance is grounded in a student’s fear that they will expose what it “wrong” with him, thus showing his classmates that he is not entirely sane. Thus, “it’s no good telling the student that he isn’t to be held responsible
for the content of his imagination”; instead, “he needs a teacher who is living proof that the
monsters are not real, and that the imagination will not destroy you. Otherwise the student will
have to go on pretending to be dull,” a performance at which he has had much practice [original
emphasis] (84).

Some of this fear of exposure can be attributed to the predominance of a Platonic view of
writing and of other forms of artistic expression. As Karen LeFevre suggests, “[w]hile a Platonic
view may encourage individuals to look within and release ideas, it may in some instances be
counter-productive, thwarting creative thinking”(26). Indeed, Johnstone argues that it is precisely
our cultural foregrounding of the self as the primary figure of creative expression that prevents
our students from venturing beyond the surface, for, “[o]nce we believe that art is self-
expression, then the individual can be criticized not only for his skill or lack of skill, but simply
for being what he is” (79). As instructors and academics, we value the notion of artistic
expression as an extension of an individual’s private self. We parse visual and written texts for
the insights into the author’s “true self” that our critical education teaches us must be present
within it—particularly if the artistic work is to be judged as having some value or resonance
beyond the borders of the frame or the page. In many English courses, we try to give our students
this same critical lens with which to read texts: even in the world after Roland Barthes, much of
our academic and cultural discourse is obsessed with locating the artist or author’s expression of
self within a work of art.

However, as Johnstone’s criticism suggests, this cultural investment in the fusion of self
and artistic expression becomes particularly problematic in the teaching of academic writing.
Within the writing traditions and genres of much of the academy, academic writing is not artistic
and it is not intricately perceived as an expression of the author’s “self.” The students whom we encounter in first year writing classes have spent at least four years within an academic discourse that has taught them that their selfhood is inextricably tied to the texts that they produce. The overemphasis of self in discussions of writing within the dominant discourse conditions reinforce this belief, leading students to believe that a criticism of their writing, their “artistic” expression, is a criticism of their self—that the red marks we leave on their texts are akin to cuts in their own flesh.

To overcome this conditioning, the instructor within the improvised classroom herself has to show students that spontaneous thinking or creation invariably leads to what the students perceive as mistakes. Indeed, I would argue that the first step in teaching students to become comfortable with the generative and unpredictable possibilities of their own minds is to embody that same practice in our teaching. In her practice, an instructor should embody the notion that a discovering that a choice or idea doesn’t work within a particular context is a key part of the writing process. Indeed, these moments of realization often occur as a result of self-reflection; in an instant, we might recognize that something doesn’t work, but we must reflect for some time—by ourselves or with others—to determine why it did not work.

As an instructor, my goal is to help my students learn to “trust in letting something occur” on stage, on the page, or in their minds, “rather than making it occur” (Bogart and Landau 19). As Ann Berthoff argues, “The most powerful speculative instrument English teachers have is imagination.” (4). She suggests that, as instructors, “[i]nstead of asking, ‘What is imagination?’ we can ask, ‘What does imagination do?’ …The imagination is a doer, an agent; it is active” (28). Through my performance-as-teacher, the in-class activities in which we
participate, and the writing assignments I design, I want to help students recognize that there is a
world outside of their bodies and minds, that “[t]he source for action and invention comes to us
from others and from the physical world around us” (Bogart and Landau 19).

One of the ways in which our practice can reflect our own willingness to let something
occur in the classroom is by repositioning ourselves as a reformulator, a collaborator, in a
student’s thinking, rather than simply an assessor. Janet Emig argues that instructors should
engage with a student’s writing as it is formulated, rather than when it is nearly complete. By
way of example, Emig examines the interaction between a child who is not yet fully verbal and
his adult caregiver. She argues that a child’s mother or caregiver serves as the “first audience”
for the child’s attempts to express herself or examine the world through speech (59).

A child who is attempting to say the word “cookie,” for instance, may at first be able only
to verbalize part of the word: she might wave her arms in the direction of her mother while
saying “cooo.” In such a case, however, the mother-as-audience is not a passive recipient of the
child’s attempts at oral articulation; rather, she is the child’s “first co-speaker/co-writer,” serving
“almost simultaneously” as the child’s “collaborator in formation [and] his reformulator” (Emig
59). That is, an adult caregiver interprets what she thinks the child is trying to say by examining
the context of the utterance and observing the child’s movement or gesturing. When the adult
identifies the word that she thinks the child is attempting to express, she will vocally revise and
extend the child’s sound into a complete thought. In this instance, she might say “Cookie? You
want a cookie? You can say it—coookkiiie.” Following this line of logic, Emig suggests that
“if we [as instructors] can be present when a student is first formulating his discourse...we can
help him as once his mother did in expanding the discourse—acting, in a sense, as a
collaborator” [original emphasis]. Rhetorically, the instructor becomes an active, “immediate” audience for the first stages of the student’s writing-as-thinking, “expressing with gentle tact and concern the difficulties a trusted audience...[is] having in comprehending the discourse” (59).

However, as Vygotsky suggests, an instructor helps a student to determine what he is trying to say not only by listening to the language that he does possess but also through observing his gestures and body language. For example, in observing a small child who wants his mother to lift him into a chair, Vygotsky argues that “it becomes obvious that it is not only the word mama that means, say, ‘Mama, put me in the chair,’ but the child’s whole behavior at that moment (his reaching out toward the chair, trying to hold on to it., etc.)” [original emphasis] (65). Recognizing that he lacks the language he needs to verbally communicate his desire, the child fills in those gaps using body movements and physical gestures. Vygotsky notes that “[t]he word, at first, is a conventional substitute for the gesture; it appears long before the child’s crucial ‘discovery of language’ and before he is capable of logical operations” (65). In this situation, the child lacks the ability to make meaning with words, but, instinctually recognizing the connection between a physical gesture and the meaning of the word “chair,” he reaches towards the chair, literally extending his body to bridge the gap between what he wants to say and what he is able to say.

Though first-year writing students are able to engage in a wider variety of linguistic operations than can a small child, many do enter the composition classroom lacking the vocabulary they will need to participate in academic discourse. When a student is trying to formulate the words that they need in that new language, she will often rely on physical gesture, or tone of voice, or body posture or position to take the place of the language skills that she
lacks. I would argue that, when acting as a student’s “reformulator,” composition instructors must become aware of the ways in which he will use the instinctual connection between body and meaning to try to show us what he is unable to tell us.

The structure of an improv acting rehearsal suggests how the composition classroom might incorporate the kind of early intervention strategy that Emig describes. Johnstone describes how, in his role as director of an improv class, interjects himself into scenes that are going nowhere. For instance, a scene may stop moving forward if the actors don’t listen to each other, or they refuse to talk to one another, or they if they make so many unproductive choices as to character, location, and action that the scene has come to a screeching halt. As Johnstone observes, new improv actors in particular tend to make poor choices at the beginning of a scene, a stage in which one such choice can derail the scene’s nascent potential.

For example, one of the cardinal rules of improv acting is to avoid blocking the action of a scene by denying ideas or story elements that another actor has introduced into a scene. As improv actors and directors Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson argue in their book *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, “[d]enying the reality that is created on stage ends the progression of the scene,” leaving the actors with few ways in which to bring the scene to a conclusion which will satisfy both them and their audience (48). For instance, when an actor enters a scene and cries, “Son, it’s so good to see you! Give your old mother a hug,” she immediately establishes both her character and her relationship to the actor who is already on stage. In one line of dialogue, she creates a key component of the reality of the scene: she is the mother of the other actor.
If, however, the other actor shouts, “No, you’re not my mother! You’re my dentist!”, he immediately destroys what his fellow actor has created and effectively squashes the scene’s creative potential. A scene cannot move forward when the actors cannot agree on the rules of the reality they’re navigating together. Johnstone argues that many inexperienced actors have great difficulty with this notion precisely because they aren’t able to recognize the patterns of denial or blocking in scenes which they observe; while on stage, they may be able to identify a moment when their fellow actor denies their suggestion, but in the audience, they have trouble picking up on this pattern in the other actors’ behavior (95). Thus, when an actor ignores or attempts to overwrite an element of the scene that’s already been established, Johnstone “often stop[s] an improvisation to explain how the blocking is preventing the action from developing” (95).

Improvis directors often use this intervention technique, sometimes called “sidecoaching,” to “keep players on track while they are improvising informally” in rehearsal (Halpern, Close, and Johnson 149). When engaged in sidecoaching, a director does not physically intervene in a scene; rather, she “makes an off-stage suggestion [and] [t]he actors continue their scene, incorporating the director’s suggestion without breaking their reality” (Halpern, Close, and Johnson 149). The director-as-sidecoach does not ask the actors to abandon the scene; rather, like a football coach calling a time out, the sidecoach calls the scene to a halt, points out what choices aren’t working and why, and then asks the actors to resume the scene with this new knowledge in mind.

In the context of an improv rehearsal, a director can use early and immediate interjections to show, rather than tell, the actors how their choices have negatively impacted their scene. The tweaks that he makes to his actors’ choices through sidecoaching serve not only to create more
constructive improvisations, but require the actors to embody a revision, an edit, to their scene. They physically enact the change and feel, as well as see and hear, the difference that this change makes in their ability to move the scene forward. In a sense, the director and the actor are writing together. Rather than explicitly dictating the action, gently the director steers the actor’s body as it moves through the patterns of a particular game. Over time, he lifts his hand away so that the student can explore the boundaries of those patterns on her or his own.

Although the use of sidecoaching is not uncommon, there is some disagreement over its effectiveness. As Halpern, Close, and Johnson argue, there can be value in allowing a sputtering scene to continue because actors’ “mistakes often lead to more interesting discoveries” (149). Rather than wave students away from the pitfalls that they’ve created, the authors suggest that a director instead save her comments until the end of an ineffective scene, when it “is critiqued and the problem is discussed” (149). An improv director’s comments are usually focused on the structure and content of the scene, rather than on smaller, less important choices. For example, a director might note that "Things went south when you chose to leave the grocery store" or "You made a strong choice in establishing your character's motive.” Alternatively, she may also ask questions of the actors, such as: "Why do you think the scene stalled after Tim entered?" or “Why did you decide that you should leave the scene at that moment?” For new improv actors, receiving this kind of interactive feedback—and hearing it as the director works with other actors—can help them both to recognize how choices they make can affect a scene in which they are playing, and to learn what they should look for when watching scenes performed by other actors.
For composition instructors, the "sidecoaching" concept offers another way of identifying the purpose of written comments on student work and of defining the contents of those comments. As Emig suggests, this kind of constructive intervention into a student's piece of writing is particularly useful during the early phases of the writing process. When this early-and-often intervention is re-defined as sidecoaching, the purpose of those interventions becomes clearer. Rather than focusing solely on grammar, spelling, and mechanics, or engaging in what Mills describes as the “triumphant…pointing out” of a piece’s weaknesses, the comments of an instructor-as-sidecoach are focused on larger questions of the content and structure of the student's work (25).

Like an improv director, the composition instructor cannot—no matter how much she might desire it—take a student’s place in her own writing process; to do so not only negatively disrupts the piece itself, but also deprives the student of the opportunity to adjust her performance based on the feedback she receives from her peers or her instructor. Within the improvised classroom, an instructor's comments—particularly during the first rumblings of the writing process—should be focused on the structure and content of the student’s work. For example, an instructor might say: "This paragraph goes south when you abandon this idea" or "Including this example was a strong choice" or "Why do you think the essay stalls in the last two paragraphs?" It's less important at this stage for the student to be told that he shouldn't have used a comma; it's more important that he understand why a poorly organized paragraph stops his essay cold. As Mills wryly notes, however, “Many teachers, perhaps all of us, still mark certain expression on student papers as ‘wrong,’ not because they are inappropriate to the purpose of the communication but simply because we do not like them under any circumstances”
Regarding comments as sidecoaching, or reformulating, rather than “correction,” can help us to focus our attention on what a student is trying to say, rather than noting every comma splice, spelling error, or run-on sentence.

As teachers of writing, this lack of consensus over the content and purpose of commenting on student work echoes our larger qualms about where our “help” ends and the student’s work begins. If we take Emig’s advice and intervene in a student’s thinking early in the writing process, are we denying the student the opportunity to make what Halpern, Close, and Johnston call “interesting discoveries” (149)? Indeed, one difficulty or danger of the early-intervention approach is that it strikes at the heart of the heady notions of plagiarism with which we try, unsuccessfully, to threaten our undergraduates. For many within the university community, any hint of “collaboration” between student and instructor—or a student and her peers—raises the specter of cheating scandals past: how can the students learn if they’re not doing work that is wholly their own? What I would suggest, however, is that while the equation of a student’s collaboration with the instructor or his peers as plagiarism is understandable, it is also deeply misguided, for it deprives all involved of the opportunity to become co-creators of meaning within the writing classroom.

**Staging the Feedback Loop**

In an improv acting rehearsal, the connections between the director, the actors on stage, and the actors in the informal audience are re-staged as a live, embodied version of feedback loop that Janet Emig identifies between a writer, her text, and her inner speech. For Emig, one of the defining features of the act of writing is the “immediate feedback” it provides to an author.
As she notes, a writer’s creation of text on the page “provides [a] product uniquely available for…review and re-evaluation” and “provides [a] record of evolution of thought” (129). Read in this way, writing is not the product of a insular process that occurs within the cloister of an individual’s mind; rather, it is the physical manifestation of an evolving thought process, part of which occur when the writer reads and re-thinks the text that she has just created.

As Keith Johnstone observes, a writer’s ability re-read her thinking gives her the opportunity to recognize a link between ideas that she did not originally see as connected. He cites George Schiller’s notion that, “regarded in isolation an idea may be quite insignificant…but it may acquire importance from an idea that follows it; perhaps in collation with other ideas which seem equally absurd, it may be capable of furnishing a very serviceable link’” (qtd. Johnstone 79). Therefore, a writer’s thinking moves forward by reflecting upon where her thinking has been and identifying the ways in which her previously disconnected ideas are related.

This same quality, Johnstone suggests, is also an essential tool of a successful improv actor. “The improviser,” he argues, “has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still ‘balance’ it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them.” Indeed, audiences of improv acting place great value on an actor’s ability to reincorporate ideas that were introduced earlier in a scene: “Very often an audience will applaud when earlier material is brought back into the story…They admire the improviser’s grasp, since he not only generates new material, but remembers and makes use of earlier events that the audience itself may have temporarily forgotten” (116).
Indeed, as Halpern, Close, and Johnson observe, “The most effective, satisfying laughs usually come from an actor making a connection to something that has gone before”; to elicit such a response, however, the connection “must be truly inspired by the situation on the stage at the moment, and usually can’t be planned or recreated later” (27). That is, a successful improvisation depends upon an actor’s ability to stay within the moment of the scene, to listen to his fellow players, and to react spontaneously, while remaining within the established boundaries and conventions of the game. By contrast, an actor who attempts to “read ahead,” to push the scene in the direction that he wants it to go, rather than allowing the scene to unfold on its own, is far more likely to destroy the progress of a scene and to disappoint his audience.

While improv actors must rely on their listening skills and memories in order to recognize and make use of these kinds of connections, writers have the added advantage of a material record of what Peter Elbow dubs their “live thinking.” (“Shifting Relationship” 298). Both Emig and Schiller assume that a writer, when faced with this evolutionary record of their own thoughts, will be able to recognize the ways in which their ideas are associated or related to one another. In fact, I would argue that approaching writing as an improvisational exercises can make room for tracking those associations by fashioning such a feedback loop within in the classroom. One of the primary goals of the improvised classroom then, is to stage thinking as a live and embodied process in class so that the students might participate in and observe others looking backwards at their thoughts and making connections between them.

The structure of improv acting rehearsals offers us the model for practices that stage the perpetual feedback loop that runs from the writer, to her text, to her audience, and back to the writer. In improv rehearsals, an actor is constantly moving between the roles of player and
audience and has repeated opportunities to incorporate the responses of the director, his fellow actors, and himself into his next performance. What an actor sees, hears, laughs at, is bored by, and invents herself can be immediately incorporated into her own performance and those of her fellow actors. The tight boundaries that exist for each scene—set by the rules of the improv game the actors are playing and the performance traditions of the troupe—give actors a defined space in which to improvise, to embody David Abram’s “startled response,” operating here as a spontaneous response to stimuli provided by the environment they create on stage with their fellow actors (76).

Many actors who are new to improv struggle in games where it's their responsibility to do or create too much within the scene. For example, a standard exercise for an experienced improv actor is to ask her to go onstage by herself and to use physical movement and self-generated sound to create an entire environment. Most experienced improv actors jump at this task, precisely because it gives them the opportunity to make so many different creative choices. However, for an inexperienced actor, such a task can seem terrifying: with (literally) nothing to hang on to—not even another performer—the actor is forced to confront the vastness of possibility. This kind of over-openness can lead improv students into creative limbo: faced with so many different possibilities, a student may simply freeze rather than attempt to make any creative choices. For writing instructors, this phenomenon is a familiar one: for some students, a wide open prompt like “Write about a memory that was important to you” or “How did you become who you are today?” is intimidating precisely because it asks the writer to select and then write about just one or two elements from within the entirety of their 18 or 19 years of experience.
A game with well-constructed boundaries, by contrast, effectively limits the types of choices that an actor will be asked to make. For example, the game “Alphabet” requires two players to act out a scene while creating dialogue that tracks with the order of the alphabet. For instance, if one actor says: “What’s for dinner?,,” then the second actor’s next spoken line must begin with the letter “X,” and so on. The actors work their way through the alphabet, and, when they end up back at the letter where they began, the scene is over.

Thus, the rules of the game take some of the choices away from the actor. First, the length of the scene is predetermined; each actor knows that she or he will have to spontaneously create 13 lines of dialogue. Next, the first letter of each of these lines is also predetermined, so the actor’s search for a response to his fellow actor’s line will be limited to responses that begin with the appropriate letter. In this way, though the actors are asked to create a scene off the top of their heads, they are not asked to do so within a vacuum. Working within restrictions like these, many actors find themselves liberated by the narrowness of the space in which they are asked to invent. While the game does demand that actors spontaneously create a scene with no time to deliberate, those creations are meant to drive a particular kind of scene or to accomplish a clearly identified task.

In my composition classrooms, I have seen many similarities between my first-year writing students and the novice improv actors with whom I have worked. Both groups claim that they want the freedom to do and say what they like, rather than be constrained by someone else's words or ideas; for many actors, their perception of this “freedom” is what first attracts them to improv. But I have noticed that my first-year students, like many improv novices, tend to flounder when they are given assignments or exercises that have too little structure. In creating a
writing assignment, it can be difficult to walk the line between providing sufficient structure and dictating a certain response. Indeed, many first-year writers come to us having spent four years in high school learning how to respond quickly and vacuously to overly structured assignments. I would argue that, to be effective, an assignment or exercise cannot funnel students and actors towards a single, "correct" response.

However, I’ve found that giving actors and writers tasks too much freedom can have an equally deadly result: either complete stagnation or work that feels desperate and trapped. Ann Berthoff suggests that “our students do not like uncertainty (who does?); they find it hard to tolerate ambiguity and are tempted to what psychologists call ‘premature closure.’ They want the writing to be over and done with; unfortunately, much composition teaching encourages those feelings” (22). Given the focus on assessment that dominates many discussions of education, most of our students will be particularly unprepared to grapple successfully with vague or broad assignments. Such assignments ask students to make too many choices, leading them, as Berthoff suggests, to put in the minimum effort to complete the assignment so as to avoid treading too deeply into their own imaginations.

Thus, the in-class activities and writing assignments within the improvised classroom are designed around the need for this delicate balance, and constructed to give students the opportunity to engage in and observe thinking as it happens within a bounded, creative space. Though united by this central purpose, writing exercises within this model should also be used to reinforce the other pillars of the improvised classroom: staging the making of mistakes; the students' roles as members of an audience; and the instructor's role as reformulator and collaborator. In addition, instructors need to fashion assignments and exercises so that an
appropriate amount of creative tension is created between the student and the task at hand, sufficient friction between the mind and the boundaries of an exercise so as to encourage thinking to flourish. In the next section, I will explore how composition instructors can establish and make generative use of these kinds of boundaries both within the classroom and in their writing assignments.

Generating “Exquisite Pressure”

Within the improvised classroom, one of my primary goals as an instructor is to create exercises with just enough boundaries to keep the student either drowning in or refusing to engage with the chaotic abyss of their own imaginations, while simultaneously creating enough generative tension to engage the student in response. Ann Bogart and Tina Landau suggest that, in creating these kinds of boundaries for actors, a director’s goal is to fashion what they call “Exquisite Pressure” by establishing a time limit within which a creative assignment must be completed, by “giving just the right amount of ingredients for the assignment (not too few, not too many), putting the proper number of people in each group, and [by] determining the complexity of the assignment” (139). Knowledge of these boundaries, they argue, helps actors to “enter into a state of spontaneous play”; the pressure and tension that the boundaries of the assignment give rise to focused creative thinking and problem-solving (139). Though Bogart and Landau present these techniques as part of a play-making strategy they call “Composition,” or “writing on your feet in space and time using the language of the theatre” (186), for composition instructors, the notion of “Exquisite Pressure” is a useful one in considering how we might create in-class and writing assignments that re-define writing as “spontaneous play” (139).
In my own experience as an improv director, I found that new actors were often comforted by the boundaries formed by the rules of each improv game and by a troupe’s tenets for “good” improv. Rather than restrict their responses, these clearly-defined borders allowed newer players to explore their new expressive techniques within a defined imaginative space. That is, players felt more comfortable opening themselves to the creative, generative possibility of their own minds when they understood that their invocation of mental chaos would be bound by external forces. In addition, though improv acting is grounded in a series of universal practices—such as “accept all offers” or “don’t block a fellow player”—the rules of each improv game are different. Thus, for inexperienced actors, the limits of each game feel less like restrictions because the actors have the opportunity to play and to observe many different games over the course of a rehearsal.

As a composition instructor, then, I strive to create a variety of assignments so that the students are asked to work within different kinds of boundaries in their writing throughout the semester. I approach all of my writing assignments with this goal in mind, not just those that are “creative.” Indeed, Berthoff highlights the common belief that “creative and critical writing are entirely different, that they require different brain halves, different skills, different ‘behaviors,’ different cognitive processes, different slots in the English curriculum” (26). As she notes, composition instructors often dismiss “creative” writing as less “real” than critical writing; in this way, forms of writing that are considered more imaginative than academic are consigned to what she calls “the creativity corner” of the writing classroom (28).

Like Berthoff, I reject this discrete delineation between creative and critical writing. To my mind, the creative and interpretive decisions that the creator of a poem must make are not far
removed from the kinds of decisions a student makes as she crafts an expository or research-oriented essay. The questions with which writers must grapple are very similar in content, if not in specific application, across the spectrum of writing. As Berthoff argues, the act of “[c]omposing involves the writer in making choices all along the way and thus has social and political implications: we aren’t free unless we know how to choose” (22). Thus, within my classroom, I am less interested in investing in the distinction between creative and critical writing and more interested in identifying the characteristics that are common to all types of writing.

First and foremost of these characteristics is a student’s ability to make writerly decisions about the content or form of a text, to test those decisions with one of her audiences, and then to reconsider or remake those decisions as needed. For example, the writing exercise to which I’ve received the most positive feedback from my students—and the most engaging and imaginative writing—is a prompt called “yes, and.” The exercise, inspired by Grace Paley’s short story “A Conversation with My Father,” is named for one of the central tenants of improvisational acting: accept every offer that your fellow actors make and then add to it. In practice, Bogart and Landau suggest, an actor should remember that, “[w]hen someone offers a suggestion, look for what is useful in it and build on it (Yes, and…)” and should avoid “stressing why it won’t work and what should be done instead” (140). On stage, an actor should always be adding to, rather than subtracting from, the ideas that the others actors on stage introduce. The “yes, and” rule, then, is the counterbalance to the notion that an actor should avoid denying or blocking suggestions that his fellow actors make within a scene.
In Paley’s story, the speaker, who is a professional writer, and her ailing father tangle over how a "good" story is constructed and what kinds of content that it should contain. The speaker's father asks her to “to write a simple story just once more,” he says, "the kind de Maupassant wrote, or Chekhov, the kind you used to write” (161). For him, a “simple story” is one that features “[j]ust recognizable people and then write down what happened to them next.” The speaker, however, resists what she sees as the restrictions of a “simple story”: Although she tells herself that she “would like to try to tell such a tale, if he means the kind that begins: "There was a woman..." followed by plot,” she notes this kind of linear progression is “the absolute line between two points which I've always despised. Not for literary reasons, but because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life” (161-162).

To please her father, however, the speaker tells him a short story about a woman and her son, both of whom become drug addicts. Her father rejects both the bare bones structure of the story she tells and its content, arguing that “You misunderstood me on purpose. You know there's a lot more to it. You know that. You left everything out” (162). Thus prompted, the speaker re-tells her story, adding additional details about the woman, her son, and the means by which they eventually became estranged from one another. Despite these additions, her father is still unsatisfied by what he now sees as the utter hopelessness of his daughter’s tale: “You don't want to recognize it, Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end” (162). Thus, the speaker’s attempts to resist what she sees as the depressing limitations of the traditional story structure, the lack of hope and opportunity that such a structure leaves open to its characters, lead her to create a story within which her audience, her father, finds no hope. Her decision not to bring the story to a point of resolution—to either reunite the mother and son, or make their
estrangement permanent by death or other device—creates the kind of open ending in which she, as a writer, finds hope and possibility. Her father, however, expecting the characters’ situation to be clearly resolved, finds only “tragedy” in the story’s open ending.

The structure and situation of Paley’s story inspired me to create an assignment I call “yes, and.” In the instructions for this assignment, reproduced below, I ask the students to write in response to a very short story:

Read the short story below.

Write your own short story in which you accept the bare bones of the story as they appear here and add details, explanation, and characters to make the material your own. Your story should be at least 600 words in length.

You DO NOT have to incorporate the specific language that appears in the short story below into your response. However, your story needs to hang comfortably on the narrative bones below. That is, your reader should be able to tell that the text below was the seed from which your original story sprang.

The short story to which I ask the students to respond is modeled after the first story that the speaker in “A Conversation” tells to her father. The speaker’s story is reproduced below, followed by the story from my “yes, and” assignment:

Once in my time there was a woman and she had a son. They lived nicely, in a small apartment in Manhattan. This boy at about fifteen became a junkie, which is not unusual in our neighborhood. In order to maintain her close friendship with him, she became a junkie too. She said it was part of the youth culture, with which she felt very much at home. After a while, for a number of reasons, the boy gave it all up and left the city and his mother in disgust. Hopeless and alone, she grieved. We all visit her. (Paley 162)

A man lived in a quiet apartment in the city. His sister and her husband still lived in the man’s hometown. They visited him from time to time and marveled at the traffic and the noise and the good restaurants. One day, his sister died. Their mother was still angry with the man and wouldn’t let anyone in the family call to let him know. He read his sister’s obituary in the paper. He drove out to his
mother’s house but no one would open the door. At the gravesite, the man stood behind a tall woman with an umbrella. His mother threw the first clump dirt onto the casket.

The pedagogical objective of this assignment is for students to become aware of how the writerly decisions they make can affect the content and structure of their piece of writing. What the "yes, and" assignment does well is that it forces students to make a series of these fundamental decisions—but within a very narrow window. That is, the prompt dictates the characters, the basic plot, and the order of events; the students need only decide how to flesh out the bones of the story.

As a whole, the response that I have received from the three composition classes to whom I have given this assignment has been overwhelmingly positive. The first time that I gave the assignment, I was surprised by the students' enthusiasm; what I had intended to be a one-off, in-class writing task grew, at the students' request, into two drafts of a more formal piece of writing. At the end of the term, they overwhelmingly identified "yes, and" as their favorite assignment, because, as one student said, "I got to be creative and write whatever I wanted." I was incredulous. I asked the class if they understood that the "yes, and" prompt was, in fact, the most restrictive assignment that I'd given them during the term. Most of the students did not see it this way; instead, many of them insisted that it had been the most "creative" and "free" assignment of the term.

I've observed a similar response to this assignment in my other first-year writing classes. In the fall of 2010, out of 50 students in two sections of composition, over half of the students identified their “yes, and” response as one of their strongest pieces of writing for the term and submitted a final draft of their story as a part of their final course portfolios. Many of them told
me that they returned to the story in part because they wanted to continue to develop and expand it. Of course, not all of my students have responded positively to this assignment. Some are resistant to any writing that they see as explicitly "creative," and others are just not interested in writing a short story. Overall, however, the response that I've seen to this assignment has been consistent: the narrow—but not restrictive—parameters of the task seem to give students permission to be creative, to use their imagination to make a short series of very specific decisions, rather than a longer, more abstract list of decisions that a looser assignment might require.

To my mind, it is the consistent nature of the students' responses to this assignment that makes those responses significant. In Appendix A, for example, I have included two of the more distinctive responses that students have created for this assignment. Before they encountered the "yes, and" assignment, both of these student writers had struggled with moving beyond the five-paragraph essay, and the very specific kind of thinking that the form requires. In this assignment, however, each of them generated a piece that was distinct and unlike any response I had received to the assignment to date. I would argue, then, that my students’ consistently positive response to this assignment, both as expressed to me and as represented in their writing, is due in part to the Exquisite Pressure that the boundaries of the assignment create.

A similar kind of Exquisite Pressure can be constructed within the physical boundaries of the improvisational classroom. As Skinner-Linnenberg suggests, composition instructors can incorporate improv acting exercises into their classroom activities so that writers can rehearse the roles of both author and audience (70). In this way, they can practice prewriting as a constant

1 I have received written permission from each student to anonymously include their work in this thesis.
within the writing process, rather than a discrete activity firmly stuck at the beginning of the writing process. In her book, Skinner-Linnenberg introduces a comprehensive catalog of different activities that composition instructors can use to introduce live performance into their classrooms. In addition, instructors may find inspiration in the very specific and progressively constructed improv exercises created by Viola Spolin, the more freeform games outlined by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, as well as the more general tenets of improv as discussed by Keith Johnstone.

One of the benefits of staging thinking as a live process through improvisation in the writing classroom is that it performatively models the reflective skills of which writers must often make use. Directors Bogart and Landau use their theatre-based version of “Composition…[to] make pieces so that we can point to them and say, ‘That worked,’ and ask, ‘Why?’ so that we can then articulate which ideas, moments, images, etc., we will include in our production” (12). Both directors use Composition exercises to “engage the collaborators in the process of generating their own work around a source” provided by the directors; this source forms the starting point of the production that the actors are creating (12). As a composition instructor, I would argue that the ability to create, test, and reformulate ideas in collaboration with other people will be a critical skills for our students of the twenty-first century to possess.

Though inspired by practices in the theatre, the use of improv acting exercises in the writing classroom does not transform it into a drama class. Rather, as Virginia Skinner-Linnenberg argues, “this creative activity is designed to lead to a polished essay,” or poem, or short story, or research report, and its use does not rewrite composition teachers into drama instructors (70). This public generation and immediate testing of ideas in front of their peers gives students access
not only to the generative power of their own minds—which becomes easier to access within the narrower restrictions of an Exquisite Pressure assignment—but also that of their collaborators: their peers and their instructor.

However, staging live thinking in the writing classroom on its own is not enough. As Peter Brooks notes, although “[g]roup creation can be infinitely richer, if the group is rich, than the product of weak individualism[,]…it proves nothing. There is eventually a need for authorship to reach the ultimate compactness and focus that collective work is almost obligated to miss” (35). Ultimately, as William Lutz suggests, a student will need to reflect upon what he has seen, heard, and done, so that he might “respond directly to his own experience and not someone else's” (36). Thus, the final component of the writing classroom is what I call a “green notebook”: a bounded, creative, material space in which the student can record the elements of “his own experience” over the course of a term, or a project. In the final section of this chapter, I will build on Geoffrey Sirc’s practice of using “daybooks” (270) and present the green notebook as a space in which a student can rearrange his experiences into a new kind of meaning, for, as Karen LeFevre notes, “[n]ew ideas are invented when cultural elements interact and are synthesized in an individual psyche” (24-25). Over time, a student’s green notebook becomes a material object with which she can engage in egocentric speech—a conversation-starter for self-talk. Within its pages, a student can engage in the same kind of creation, testing, and reformulating of meaning that she has practice in class and in other, externally structured writing assignments.
Setting the Boundaries for Self-Reflective Thinking

Though there are many useful parallels between improvisational acting and the act of writing, a key distinction lies in their relative materiality. Written off the cuff and performed without a script, improv is ethereal in nature, even more so than the traditional theatre. Unless a rehearsal is videotaped, there is no tangible record of the worlds, characters, and situations that the actors have created. To reincorporate elements or ideas previously introduced into a scene, then, an improv actor must rely on her ability to, as Johnstone suggests, look backwards at what has been in a scene, rather than looking ahead at what might still be. Further, the feedback loop within the rehearsal space allows her to reincorporate what she has learned from watching others perform, from listening to and participating in critique, and from her previous experience on stage. Thus, the improv actor has nothing material to turn to, no written record and must rely on what her mind recalls and on what her body remembers.

By contrast, the composition classroom offers students and instructors alike the opportunity to make a record of their thinking on paper. In English Composition as a Happening, Geoffrey Sirc presents a model of how students might use what he calls “informal writings” as a tool with which to assemble new kinds of meaning (282, 283). The form, content, and purpose of these writings are fundamentally different from what he regards as “all those process pre-writes, those simple dumpings” (282). Unlike the material generated through more formal prewriting processes, such as Peter Elbow’s freewriting, the content of Sirc’s informal writings are not stream-of-consciousness. Rather, they are “a collection of interesting, powerful statements” that a student generates or absorbs as she moves through her everyday day world (270). The student then records these ideas “on the fly” in “[a] kind of daybook or artist’s notebook.” Over time, the
student fills his daybook with “sound-bit apercus that sound good by themselves but can become workable bits in a larger structure” (Sirc 270). Thus, the daybook becomes a record of a student’s own encounters, both with the world exterior to himself and with his own reflective thinking.

The materiality of the daybook allows the student to physically reorient his informal writings in order to form new meanings from this collection of his thoughts. As Sirc argues, the daybook allows a student to remake writing “as assemblage with a structure based on association and implication,” rather than by an external arbiter like the instructor (283). Like the speaker in Grace Paley’s “A Conversation with My Father,” Sirc sees text created outside of a predetermined structure as brimming with possibilities: rewriting composition as assemblage “would make a text less loaded, less determined, less particularly styled, more open to possibilities” (283).

The creative and generative potential of the daybook is due in part to its ability to move with a student through space and time. That is, the daybook allows a student to collect many different kinds of ideas over the course of a 15-week semester, and to conduct the process of collection within the variety of environments through which she moves. In a different way than freewriting, the daybook is a record of a student’s thinking, not at particular point in time and place, but over the course of the semester or the writing project. In this way, a student, like an improv actor, can looks backwards at where she has been in order to determine how she will move forward into the future. Indeed, Sirc describes “performance-document” or “trace” is in which the writer “leav[es] behind the score or theatre-notes for your project, so others can appreciate and learn from your group’s efforts” (272). An additional value in such a record, I would argue, is that the writer can also return to her document of performance over the course of
a semester and “trace” the ways in which she made meaning within a particular set of boundaries.

In the improvised classroom, then, I propose that a student use what I call the “green notebook” to informally record her experiences over time (Lutz 36). “Green notebook” was, at first, the shorthand term that I used to orient the daybook in the context of this project. The name has stuck with me, I think, because it brings to mind the image that Sirc cites of one of his inspirations: Marcel Duchamp’s 1934 piece, *Green Box* (270). Over time, the image of Duchamp’s green box itself—more so than its contents—has merged in my mind with that of a hardbound composition notebook. Thus, my re-vision of Sirc’s daybook has become the “green notebook.”

The green notebook is an essential, textual companion to the improvised classroom. In practice, it can become an integral part of both in-class exercises and more formal writing assignments, forming a material record of a student's textual improvisations. Unlike Sirc, however, I would argue that the green notebook, like the other writing and in-class activities in the improvised classroom, should be defined by tasks designed to create Exquisite Pressure.

Driving the student’s engagement with the notebook, particularly as the semester begins, gives instructors the opportunity to engage in what Sirc calls the “exploit[ation] [of] the possibilities of our status” by “exposing students to a range of culturally valid forms as well as non-mainstream content; in so doing, we provide our audience with a host of possibilities for worlds and forms to inhabit” (267). In structuring their first interactions with the green notebook, then, instructors can introduce students to new ways of looking at or engaging with their environment, or to new kinds of questions to ask of their own experience.
Thus, the green notebook is a bounded space in which students can record their observations—of those people, places, and objects assignment by the instructor, and of elements they themselves see. To becomes skilled self-reflective thinkers, students must, as I have suggested, both engage in and observe thinking as an enlivened process. Instructors can use the green notebook as a tool with which to connect the live performance of thinking within the classroom to a student’s own actions and observations in the exterior world and to his own writing process. To do this, I suggest creating Exquisite Pressure writing exercises for the green notebook in which students are asked to observe specific elements of or performances within their environment.

As in the course’s other writing tasks and in-class activities, green notebook exercises should take a variety of forms, so that a student might practice and try on different kinds of reflective thinking. For instance, students might be asked to make a series of observations which move from the broad external environment to a reflection on their own inner speech. In such a sequence, instructors could direct students to observe: a place located off of the campus; the interactions of people they do not know in a public place; the interactions of people they know well in a more private settings; and, finally, their inner speech. For example, I have successful used this exercise, called a “spontaneous sensory monologue,” which I have adapted from James Moffett’s *Active Voice: A Writing Program Across the Curriculum*:

Choose a place away from school that you would like to observe, go there with your green notebook and a pen, and write down for fifteen minutes what you see, hear, and smell. Think of what you write as notes for yourself later. Don’t worry for now about spelling or correct sentences; write in whatever way allows you to capture on paper what you observe during that time. You may also include your thoughts and feelings about what you observe. You may also want to say what
things look, sound, or smell like. (adapted from Moffett 50)

For many of my first-year students, this assignment was one of the first they had been given in which they were asked to write “spontaneously,” without deliberation or planning, and to simply focus on what was occurring around them. Some students have regarded this assignment as liberating, but others have been uncomfortable with the unformed and unfamiliar nature of the product that the assignment asks them to generate. One of my students forced himself to write his observations as a series of formally constructed paragraphs, as he was convinced that this was what I expected and wanted him to do. When it came time for the students to talk with each other about their observations, and the way in which they had taken them down, the limitations of this student’s structured approach became evident: because of his intent focus on working his observations into paragraphs, he was unable to record much of what he experienced during those 15 minutes.

My students have also generated interesting writing from this exercise, an observation of human interaction adapted from Keith Johnstone’s *Improv*:

Go to a public place, on campus or off. Spend about 30 minutes observing the people around you. Look at groups of people, and notice how everyone's attitude changes when someone leaves or joins a group. See what you can learn about people's relationships based on their body language alone. Write up your observations in 500 words. (adapted from Johnstone 62)

Unlike the spontaneous sensory monologue, this exercises requires students to make some interpretative decisions about the social interactions that they observe. For some students, the opportunity to actively read and transcribe body language was unique. One of my older students
wrote in some detail about a near-altercation that she had observed at a local bar, and the hard-to-read interactions that had immediately preceded it. By contrast, other students seemed uninterested in interpreting the behavior of others, and wrote about group interactions in which they had participated, rather than interactions that they had observed.

In my experience, grounded exercises like these make it more difficult for students to “perform” observation or self-reflection rather than genuinely engage in it. Many of first-year students I have encountered know how to fake “personal” essays, to imitate the kind of insight that they think we want to hear in self-reflective writing. These exercises, by contrast, ask students to engage with the concrete and the material: what did you see and hear? smell and touch? taste? Later, rereading their observations, they can begin to make meanings from their experience, either alone or with the instructor or their peers. When used in sequences, observation exercises like those noted above can help students to draw the connections between the skills they use to observe the external world and those that they in observing their own thinking on the page. Thus, when used in concert with the staging of thinking as a live performance, the green notebook can become the material connection between the social world and a student’s inner speech.
CONCLUSION

As an instructor, I have just begun to navigate the boundaries of the improvised classroom. When I began this work, my experience as an instructor was limited; I will not say that I was naïve, only that my concept of the writing classroom was dominated by composition theory, rather than my own practice. As I come to the end of this project, I have spent much more time playing the role of the writing instructor; I have become a teacher, where, 12 months ago, I was performing the role of what I thought a “teacher” should be. However, though some of the ideas with which I began my research have fallen away—victims of the triumph of reality over theory—I have been surprised by how many have remained.

That said, I find that this approach—this rather freewheeling, exploratory approach to the teaching of writing—can be quite difficult in practice. In my experience, it is more difficult for me to read student writing that is “rough” rather than “deadly.” It’s harder for me to respond to meaningfully to thinking-as-writing than to writing-as-completed-thought, or to a first draft than to a final draft, because it takes more of my time and requires me to engage in a more active kind of thinking. In addition, I have found that, in order to effectively respond to rough writing, I have to rely on my knowledge of the student as an individual to determine what kinds of comments, questions, or even language to which they will respond. My time in the classroom suggests that, as Barriss Mills observes, “learning to communicate effectively is very much an individual affair; mass methods simply will not work” (25).

The practices and pedagogy that I describe in this thesis, therefore, are themselves a working draft. They represent my contribution for our discipline’s continued search for new ways in which we can present and teach reflective thinking in the writing classroom. As
composition theorist Paul Heilker argued at a recent conference, why have we, as composition instructors, convinced ourselves that we can teach first-year writing using the same methods and materials that our students have been taught for at least four years—and yet achieve a different result? (Heilker). I would argue that our students are better served if we as practitioners embrace our imaginations, what Ann Berthoff calls “the most powerful speculative instrument English teachers have.” She argues that if we [as writing instructors] can reclaim imagination, seeing it as a name for the active mind, we can use it to think with when we come to teach writing as the composing process” (4). For me, the improvised classroom has become a space in which my students and I can re-write the composition classroom as a testing ground for ideas, as a bounded space within which spontaneity is encouraged, and as a space in which I recast myself as my students’ collaborator in the making of meaning, rather than simply their assessors.
APPENDIX A:
SAMPLE STUDENT RESPONSES TO “YES, AND” ASSIGNMENT

STUDENT RESPONSE I

Through the Wasteland

Dan watched the glow of the television crack and then fade into nothingness as he turned his television off. In the distance he could hear the light buzz of an electric fence. Besides that his apartment was quiet. The entire city was very quiet at night time, something he had grown used to in the past few years.

Pulling a cover over himself, Dan laid down on his cool, dark futon and drifted into a restless sleep.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP. Dan’s eyes opened wide. He climbed out of his bed, still groggy. It was early morning. The first signs of life began in the city as people began to get ready for work. Dan could hear music being played in the apartment above.

He walked towards his large window. His eyes glazed over, as they do every morning. All around the city people were turning on their lights and it was a mesmerizing display. The city began to feel alive. This was what Dan came to the city for, all those years ago.

Dan glanced downwards. Far below lay the street. To his right he saw the walls of the city, magnificent as ever. Outside of those walls was a thousand miles of wastelands. Ever since the zombies invaded there are only a few safe havens for humans. One was the city and the other was Springfield, his childhood home.
Springfield is also where his sister and her husband live. Every once in a while they would visit him in the city, but helicopter rides over zombie territory are scary. It was worth it though because they enjoyed eating at all the fancy restaurants and walking around and admiring the city.

5 Days Later

Dan was thoroughly worried. He hadn’t heard from his sister or her husband for almost a week. He would’ve called their house but then there was a chance his mother might pick up the phone. She was still angry with him. Ever since he had moved into the city his mom had wanted him to move back. He didn’t want to and they argued over it a lot. Finally one day they had stopped talking.

The Next Day

It was early in the morning again. Dan had woken up from another restless night of sleeping. He picked up the paper from last night to pass the time while he was eating his pancakes. He decided to read the obituaries section because it was his favorite part of the newspaper. Right in the middle of the page in big fancy letters was the obituary for his sister. He continued reading. His sister had been killed by zombies.

“Nobody in my family called to let me know, I wonder why?” Dan sadly pondered. “I bet my mother has something to do with this,” he thought to himself, feeling a slight hint of longing to see his mother again. After finishing his breakfast, Dan resolved to take a trip to the funeral.

Opening a box in the closet filled with his old baseball gear, Dan tossed aside the dusty mitt and water bottle he used as a child. Reaching down to find his baseball bat, Dan’s
fingernails tapped against his old slugger with a satisfying clink! With a smile, he pulled out his bat and held it up. Stretching his arms out, Dan took a few practice swings.

Feeling better about this trip already, Dan picked up the water bottle for the journey and boxed up the remaining items on the floor. Walking towards the door, Dan saw a square piece of paper at his feet. He reached down and picked it up. Flipping it around he saw it was a photograph of him when he was a child. With a look of pure joy, Dan was standing in the foreground, holding his new mitt in the air. Behind him his mother stood, with an equally large smile, her hand rested on Dan’s shoulder. With a sniffle, Dan put the photograph in his pocket and rushed out the door.

Traveling over the wilderness would be dangerous, especially since all he had for transportation was an old bicycle. Riding out of the city with the baseball bat prone to the handlebars, Dan set off into the wasteland. This was going to be a dangerous journey.

A Few Hours Later

He arrived at Springfield, out of breath. It had been an exciting and dangerous trip. Behind his shoulder a thousand zombies, all slowly shuffling, were headed directly at him. Dan rushed inside the tall gates of Springfield. He had accidentally lured all of the zombies to the town. He ran towards his mother’s house to warn her. Nobody would open the door. Dan then rushed to the funeral.

He tried to push his way to the front, but there was a tall woman with an umbrella blocking his view of the ceremony. Peeking over the shoulder of the woman he could see his mother. She threw the first clump of dirt upon the casket.
In the distance, yelling could be heard. The zombies had broken through the walls of Springfield and were killing everybody. Soon everyone would be dead.

“You have killed us all!” He could hear his mothers scream over all the others.

A soft “Sorry guys,” was the only thing that he could say before he was eaten by the zombies.
A Saturday Ritual

Every neighborhood has at least one odd person who no one truly knows. For me, this person is Mr. Wilson. Every Saturday morning I can see Mr. Wilson, who lives on the top floor of the apartment building across the street, looking out his window. He stays there, looking at the passing people until his sister and her husband visit. They live up the street in the rich houses and come every Saturday with the newspaper and a bag of groceries from my shop. I never understood why he did not come to my grocery store himself, but who am I to judge?

The sister is quite beautiful, with long curly blonde hair and intriguing green eyes; her husband is also quite handsome with his 6’5” frame and athletic build. The couple stays at the Wilson’s house for a couple of hours then head to their own home. When they leave his apartment, Mr. Wilson always goes back to his window and watches them until he can’t see them anymore. This ritual has almost become second nature to me, and that’s why the one Saturday the sister did not come struck me as odd, especially since I saw her the night before buying the groceries.

I waited all day Saturday and half of Sunday before I succumbed to the guilt and pity that I should do something instead of sitting there watching. So, I grabbed a sack of groceries and a newspaper from my shop and went across the street to Mr. Wilson’s. When I knocked on Mr. Wilson’s door, no one came. I knew he was there because he hadn’t have left the window since that morning. I tried again and knocked louder. This time I heard movement from the inside and
knew he was coming. He opened the door and looked as though he hadn’t showered since yesterday, which was probably true because he never left that window.

The apartment was dull with little light. It had all sorts of plaques, trophies, and certificates in cases and frames throughout the rooms. Everything looks dusted and well cleaned, but there was a sense of depression and sadness. I gave the newspaper to Mr. Wilson, who in fact looked to be in his early forties and not an old man. He practically snatched the newspaper from my hand and scanned each page. His hand started shaking and he nearly fell over with shock. Pointing to a name-Sarah Jennkins on the back page of the obituaries, I began to read. “Sarah Jennkins, 43, was killed late Friday night after returning from the grocery store. Left to mourn are her husband, dear brother, and mother. She will be forever in the memories of every person her bright smile touched.”

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I asked cautiously.

I was only answered with a moment of silence, then a whispered “Can you drive me there?”

I was completely confused and had no idea where “there” was, but consented anyway. We went in my truck, and he asked if I had a cell. I gave him my phone and heard pieces of his conversation. Something about his mother not wanting him to find out because of him not taking over the family business his father had made. I drove Mr. Wilson to this monstrosity of a house, where Wilson hopped out of the truck, left the door open and began pounding on the door. No one opened the door; so, he began walking back to the truck only to stare at the gravel. I drove him back to his apartment and watched as he went inside.
Two days later, as I was reading the paper, I saw a picture of a gloomy Mr. Wilson and a severe older woman with an umbrella at a funeral. As I read the caption and story I realized it was Mr. Wilson’s mother in the umbrella next to him at his sister’s funeral. According to the article, Mr. Wilson had refused to take over the family business when his father died ten years ago. As I continued reading, I was shocked to find that Mr. Wilson was to be taking over his deceased father’s business in L.A. I wondered if this was Mr. Wilson’s way of honoring his sister, by restoring the relationship with his last living relative.

As I look over at Mr. Wilson’s old apartment, I have an overwhelming sense of loss that I missed the opportunity to know an extraordinary man and friend. If Mr. Wilson had stayed, I can only imagine what type of friendship [it] could have been.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


