

**IMPR\*6010 FALL 2019**

**CORE CONCEPTS IN CRITICAL STUDIES IN IMPROVISATION I**

Class Schedule: Tuesdays: 2:30-5:20 p.m.

Room: Seminar Room (International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation House)

**Instructor: Dr. Daniel Fischlin (SETS) / email: [dfischli@uoguelph.ca](mailto:dfischli@uoguelph.ca)**

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**Office Hours: TBA or by appointment**

**Course Description:**

Improvisation is one of the most ubiquitous forms of human activity straddling multiple forms of activity, social practice, and creative expression. It is, at once, profoundly generative, playful, contrarian, experimental, and irreducible. Yet its effects, especially in a wide range of creative forms are ineluctable, broadly unstudied or ignored, or misunderstood. This course examines various theories of improvisation from a number of different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives including music, theatre, literature, and movement. Starting with a critical interrogation of the notion—associated with the ICASP (Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice) research and furthered via the work currently situated within the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI)—that musical improvisation is a generative yet largely unexamined model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action, this course will explore a range of articulations about improvisation in both theory and practice. These include, artists' accounts of the process of improvisation; interdisciplinary and transcultural notions of improvisation; critical/literary theory and improvisation; the history and politics of improvisatory discourses, especially with regard to alternative forms of community-making, problem-solving, crisis management, and resilience; the rights implications of improvisatory discourses; and experimentalist / avant-garde forms.

Improvisation is more than an artistic conceit, more than the spontaneous creation of notes by musicians or words and gestures by actors or movement by dancers. In its most fully realized forms, improvisation is the creation and development of new, unexpected, and productive co-creative relations among people. It teaches us to make “a way” out of “no way” by cultivating the capacity to discern hidden elements of possibility, potential, hope, and promise in even the most discouraging circumstances. Improvisers work with the tools at hand in the arenas that are open to them in order to imbue the world with generative possibility and unexpected strategies for addressing the relationship between creation and social practice. Co-creating without a written score or script, improvisers envision and enact something new, to enrich their experience in the world by acting upon it and changing it, in the process creating things that would not have otherwise come into existence. In this interdisciplinary course, we will follow the lead of the artists and activists we study to move strategically across seemingly impermeable categorical divides: improvisation and human rights, academic work and activism, theory and practice.

Taking as a point of departure performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, this course invites students to explore how the working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. The course will consider improvisation not simply as a musical form, but, perhaps more urgently, as a complex social phenomenon that mediates transcultural inter-artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, community, history, and the body. Though focused primarily on critical / theoretical texts, as well as on analyses of specific performances and recordings, the course will also make available innovative community-facing learning opportunities through IICSI's partner organizations.

The class will use literary texts, musical recordings, performance and practice-based productions (dance, film, theatre, and performance art) as a means for theorizing the intersection among improvisation, community, and social practice.

Students will be encouraged to work across cultural and disciplinary differences via their research, and all students will be asked to undertake research or editing work on at least one form of improvisatory practice in which they are interested. Students should expect to read across a wide range of texts and work for the course may be considered for publication in [\*Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation\*](#) edited by the IICSI team here at the University of Guelph. The course will thus introduce students to the scholarly basics of online publication, editing, knowledge dissemination, and critical thinking in relation to a living, embodied practice of activating improvisatory practices that is the basis for the course. Additionally, students will be encouraged to develop forms of community-facing scholarship—whether through specific community-facing undertakings, radio dissemination, concert and other forms of public presentation work that will be determined on a collective basis by the class in consultation with me. The Guelph independent art-space [\*Silence\*](#) will provide one potential venue for community-facing work that the class undertakes.

Since some of the course materials are audiovisual it will be crucial that you attend all viewings—and that you make sure you receive all study questions related to course materials. These will form the basis for the written and oral course work.

Finally, a key aspect of the course will involve direct contact with and visits to the class from improvisatory practitioners across a variety of media. These portions of the course will involve workshops on different forms of improvisatory practice that may entail participation. No prior experience is required.

### **Required Texts:**

Fischlin, Daniel, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Duke University Press, 2013).

Caines, Rebecca and Ajay Heble, *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts* (Routledge 2014).

Both texts are available at the Bookshelf in downtown Guelph: 41 Quebec St, Guelph, ON; (519) 821-3311. I will be active on CourseLink posting secondary readings and audio-visual materials and links as well.

Note that the course is organized along a set of key metaphors and concepts associated with improvisation: rights and community; listening; trust/risk; flow; dissonance; responsibility; liveness; surprise; and hope. I've made sure that the readings and audiovisual materials for each sub-section of the course cover a wide range of practices, approaches, and disciplinary engagements that address both theoretical and practice-based concerns associated with improvisation.

### **Course Resources:**

It is important that you understand improvisation as more than simply an academic area of study. To this end and to access a wide range of improvisatory activities please avail yourselves of the following resources.

1. For free access to a wide range of online research on improvisation, please consult the following two sites:

[International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation](http://improvisationinstitute.ca/)  
<http://improvisationinstitute.ca/>

[Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation](https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/issue/archive)  
<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/issue/archive>

[Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice](http://www.improvcommunity.ca/)  
<http://www.improvcommunity.ca/>

2. Also, since Guelph is actually the hub for numerous forms of improvisatory creative practices, I'd strongly recommend that you subscribe to the following two mailing lists to stay aware of extra-class events in which improvisation figures. The first is for the [ImprovNotes](#), which highlights events you may find interesting, including ongoing reading group activities and the like. The second mailing list pertains to the downtown community art-space [Silence](#), which features a wide array of performers and practitioners who use improvisation as a key feature of their practice(s).

Finally, Guelph is one of the few places anywhere to actually have an improviser in residence, funded by the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI) and the Musagetes Foundation. As part of the annual Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium a unique array of people will be visiting Guelph over the first week of term and you are

strongly advised to attend as many events as you can. The first seminars of the course will be a blend of readings and reports based on attendance at the Colloquium events.

<http://guelphjazzfestival.com/colloquium/>

As other events occur throughout the term I will be regularly posting notices to CourseLink. Please try to get out and attend/participate in some of these. Guelph truly is a hub for a wide variety of improvising practices and you have access to a unique set of resources here.

### **Assignments and Assessment:**

The course will be evaluated as follows:

1. Ongoing Seminar Presentations (40%); please note that these will be assigned on a weekly basis with careful attention to equal distribution of workload. In grad courses I emphasize seminar work as a way of getting students to articulate and work through theory, close reading practices, and the sharing of information in a way that activates critical thinking. I also try to build collaborative and dialogic structures for responding to key critical issues the course addresses. Expect to do some if not most of the seminar work in a collaborative context. Each week via CourseLink I'll release who is responsible for preparing readings to present to the class in the following week's seminar. A focus for seminars will be linking theory and readings directly to lived, embodied experiences across a range of practices and behaviours where improvisation is evident.
2. Outline, topic-specific annotated bibliography, draft work on paper, collaborative responses (see below) and/or community-facing project development work that is group- and collaboration-based, and a Commonplace Book (see outline below) that you will keep to track your readings, ideas, research initiatives, etc. for the length of the course. (30%).
3. Final Paper and/or community-facing project work based exclusively on in-class lectures, materials, and so forth—this essay/project may overlap with Sections 1 and 2 above (30%) **and will require outline and draft work that will be vetted (minimum 20 pages)**. The aim here is to have everyone produce publishable or close to publishable work that has been carefully vetted and responded too over the course of the term. If you choose to do a community-facing public project then similar guidelines apply and you will be evaluated on the body of work done through the course of the term as well as on specific outputs/outcomes.
4. Feel free to consult with me at any time as you develop the ideas that will become this paper or project.

Please note that ALL submissions of materials for this course must be made in hard copy/CD/DVD and not via email attachments. I anticipate that many of you will ultimately publish work produced for this course in some sort of web-based environment

so please be prepared to work across a variety of media (visual, audio, as well as textual). Where necessary please be ready to address relevant copyright issues in attributing these media properly.

Finally, if any of you decide to work collaboratively or wish to develop a cocreative project instead of a paper please see me in person to discuss. These are options for all students in the class but need to be vetted and discussed first.

### Commonplace Book Guidelines:

**1.** Commonplace books were widely used in the early modern period by students, writers, scholars, diplomats, and the like as an aid for remembering useful concepts or facts they had learned. A commonplace book is essentially a personalized archive of what you have found useful in your reading and thinking about a particular topic. It is incredibly useful as a creative tool for note taking in a way that respects your own interests and often provides a wonderful roadmap (in hindsight) for your evolving reflections on a particular topic. Commonplace books (or commonplaces) were a way to compile knowledge, usually by writing information into books or notebooks. “Commonplace” is a translation of the Latin term *locus communis* (from Greek *tópos koinós*) which means “a theme or argument of general application,” such as a statement of proverbial wisdom. In this original sense, commonplace books were collections of sayings, important passages from the readings undertaken by the keeper of a commonplace book, and thoughts and annotations on those passages.

**2.** In compiling your commonplace book for this course think creatively. It should include, among others, your notes from seminars; thoughts on your notes and what you learn in both the seminars and in your own reading; important passages, images, terms, and so on that strike you during your study of the course materials. Your commonplace book can also include creative responses, secondary sources you find useful, images, sounds, and the like. Think of your commonplace book as a distinct creation that you’re going to produce over the next three months. Remember that each commonplace book should be unique to its creator’s particular interests and choice of focus.

**3.** The commonplace book will be a key aspect in preparing for the final paper associated with this course and should gather all materials on all aspects of the course in one place. Designate a special notebook or binder for use as your commonplace book, preferably something that can be added to with inserts and other kinds of material. Do not leave off working on this until the end of the term—your work on this aspect of the course should be ongoing and consistent from the beginning to the end of the course. Entries should be made once or twice a week on average and should be written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person. Remember that this is an intellectual journal and not a diary. Summaries of the texts we’re studying are not enough—the journal is a place for argument and ideas, not repetition. Feel free to disagree, to argue, to experiment with ideas, and so forth. This should be done on your computer and then printed off and insert into a binder or notebook along with any other materials you deem appropriate. Your commonplace book is work-place limited only by your imagination. Take it seriously.

4. All commonplace books will be marked based on the quality and depth of the note-taking; the creative focus each individual brings to the project; accuracy and detail; neatness and organization; and most importantly the overall intellectual quality of the substance of the materials you write and respond to.

**Course Outline / Reading List (subject to change depending on class needs)**

**General Note:** All primary readings for the course will come from the two assigned texts. Supplementary readings and audiovisual materials will be posted to CourseLink on a regular basis. Expect some degree of shift in the readings depending on class interests and needs. Feel free to plunge into the assigned texts as soon as possible and start reflecting on their content. I'll be assigning seminars on a rotating basis and teaming you up with each other as needed in order to develop class discussions. Seminars should include a basic overview of assigned readings and a set of talking points and examples to generate discussion—a key element in seminars will be collaboration, thoughtful response and dialogue. Also since this course is interdisciplinary I've asked people to consider how music seems to have generated the most elaborate discourse about improvisation even though the practice is found across all forms of expression. To that end, and to bridge the theory/practice divide, I've scheduled hands-on workshops with practitioners that will explore sound, movement, and theatrical expression. It is very important that you bring your own sets of interests, backgrounds, and research instincts to bear on course materials.

**Week 1 (September 11):** Class introductions; assignment of first seminars; basic concepts. Showing of First Part of Derek Bailey's *On the Edge: Improvisation in Music*.

**Week 2 (September 18):** Seminar discussions that introduce the range of course materials (introductory materials from *The Fierce Urgency of Now* and *Spontaneous Acts*).

- Prelude to the Fierce Urgency of Now (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz)
- Improvised Listening (Lipsitz)
- Improvised Trust (Waterman)
- Improvised Flow (Foster)
- Improvised Dissonance (Stewart)
- Improvised Responsibility (Fischlin)
- Improvised Liveness (Grant)
- Improvised Surprise (Caines)

**Week 3 (September 25): Rights and the Community Ethics of Improvisation**

- Dissolving Dogma: Improvisation, Rights, and Difference (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz)
- Martin Luther King (Berlin Jazz Festival speech and "Fierce Urgency of Now" speech) (CourseLink posting)
- Improvising Community: Rights and Improvisation as Encounter Narratives (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz)
- Improvisation, Social Movements, and Rights in New Orleans (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz)

**Week 4 (October 2): Improvising Sound Workshop** with Gary Diggins (independent composer, performer, improviser, music therapist). **NOTE: This seminar will take place downtown at Silence, 46 Essex St.**

**Week 5 (October 9): NO CLASS/THANKSGIVING**

**Week 6 (October 16): Listening**

- A Listening Questionnaire” (in *Shifter* 14 p. 20) (Vijay Iyer; CourseLink posting)
- Improvisation (Lecoq)
- Going Fragile (Mattin)
- Music, Language, and Cultural Styles: Improvisation as Conversation (Monson)
- On Listening (Nancy)
- Deep Listening Meditations (Oliveros)

**Week 7 (October 23): Trust/Risk**

- Improvisation (Stanislavski)
- Afterthoughts (Johnstone)
- Thoughts On Improvisation (Nettl)
- Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal)
- Community Performance (Kuppers)
- Spontaneous Combustion (Banes)

**Week 8 (October 30): Improvising Movement Workshop TBA**

**Week 9 (November 6): Dissonance**

- Phantoms of the Other: Fragments of the Communal Unconscious (Bharucha)
- Bebop as Cultural Alternative (Belgrad)
- Happenings in the New York Scene (Kaprow)
- Other: From Noun to Verb (Mackey)
- Playing Like a Girl: The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group (Smith)

**Week 10 (November 13): Flow**

- A Theoretical Model for Enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi)
- The Impermanent Art (Cunningham)
- Improvisation and Ensemble (Chekov)
- Theory of the Dérive (Debord)
- All Aboard the Night Train (Rose)
- Writing Improvisation into Modernism (Wallace)
- Essentials of Spontaneous Prose (Kerouac)

**Week 11 (November 20): Theatre Improvisation Workshop TBA**

### **Week 12 (November 19): Liveness and Responsibility**

- Liveness (Auslander)
- The Present of Performance (Lehmann)
- The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Scott-Heron)
- Gittin' To Know Y'All (Lewis)
- Kinship, Intelligence and Memory (Roach)
- Swing: From Verb to Noun (Baraka)

### **Week 13 (November 27): Surprise and Hope: Making the Connections**

- Yoruba Play and the Transformation of Ritual (Drewal)
- Taken By Surprise (Foster)
- Playing (Schechner)
- Seven Aspects of Spontaneity (Spolin)
- DJ (Compton)
- Epilogue: Hope and Improvisation (Parker)
- Sounding Truth to Power: Improvisation, Black Mobility, and Resources for Hope (Fischlin, Heble, Lipsitz)

### **E-mail Communication**

As per University regulations, all students are required to check their <uoguelph.ca> e-mail account regularly: e-mail is the official route of communication between the university and its students.

### **When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement**

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons, please advise the course instructor (or designated person, such as a teaching assistant) in writing, with your name, id#, and e-mail contact. See the Undergraduate Calendar for information on regulations and procedures for Academic Consideration: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-ac.shtml>

### **Drop Date**

The last date to drop one-semester Fall 2018 courses, without academic penalty, is **Friday November 2**. For regulations and procedures for Dropping Courses, see the Undergraduate Calendar: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/current/c08/c08-drop.shtml>

### **Copies of out-of-class assignments**

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

### **Accessibility**

The University of Guelph is committed to creating a barrier-free environment. Providing services for students is a shared responsibility among students, faculty and administrators. This relationship is based on respect of individual rights, the dignity of the individual and



the University community's shared commitment to an open and supportive learning environment. Students requiring service or accommodation, whether due to an identified, ongoing disability or a short-term disability should contact the Centre for Students with Disabilities as soon as possible.

For more information, contact CSD at 519-824-4120 ext. 56208 or [emailcsd@uoguelph.ca](mailto:emailcsd@uoguelph.ca) or see the website: <http://www.csd.uoguelph.ca/csd/>

### **Student Rights and Responsibilities**

Each student at the University of Guelph has rights which carry commensurate responsibilities that involve, broadly, being a civil and respectful member of the University community. The Rights and Responsibilities are detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar:

<https://www.uoguelph.ca/registrar/calendars/undergraduate/2014-2015/c01/index.shtml>

### **Academic Misconduct**

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity and enjoins all members of the University community – faculty, staff, and students – to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. The Academic Misconduct Policy is detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar: