

TEACHING AS IMPROVISATION

La enseñanza como improvisación

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we discuss the centrality of improvisation for teaching, based particularly on readings of Cassin (2014, 2020), Rancière (1991, 1999, 2020), and Bailey (1992). Our starting point is that there simply can be no teaching without improvisation, i.e., the delicate practice of responding to, situating, and attuning to events within educational encounters that cannot be foreseen, but constantly call for attention and action through the finest virtue of our intellect at play. In the article, we go along with the early Sophists for whom improvisation meant to be able to speak about everything by allowing oneself to be led by opportunity (Cassin, 2014). We

will be claiming that improvisation of the Sophist teacher is both an intellectual and bodily virtue, requiring discipline as well as *poësis* and *technê* as well as *praxis*. In short, improvisation as a specific form of educational performativity. Together with Rancière (1991, 2020), DiPiero (2020), and Bailey (1992) we intend to show how improvisation in teaching speaks to our senses and sets into motion simultaneously the sharing and uniqueness of sensing as such, captured by Rancière's understanding of *le partage du sensible*. Improvisation, we conclude, can be understood as the product of contingent encounters between subjects, objects, and environments, where it emerges in the rupture between form and content (DiPiero, 2020). As such, it allows for other ways of speaking and being in the world than those desired by the institutionalisation of a certain *police order* (fixing a particular and non-negotiable *partage du sensible*) and therefore becomes, we suggest, a central element in a democratic realization of teaching practice.

Keywords: teaching; improvisation; democratization; sophist; platonian-aristotelian; *Partage du Sensible*.

RESUMEN

En este artículo discutimos la centralidad de la improvisación en la enseñanza, basándonos en particular en lecturas de Cassin (2014, 2020), Rancière (1991, 1999, 2020) y Bailey (1992). Nuestro punto de partida es que no puede haber enseñanza sin improvisación, es decir, la delicada práctica de responder a, situar y sintonizar con sucesos dentro de los encuentros educativos que no pueden preverse, sino que requieren constantemente nuestra atención y acción aplicando la más refinada virtud de nuestro intelecto. En el artículo seguimos las premisas de los primeros sofistas, para los que la improvisación implicaba la capacidad de hablar sobre cualquier cosa dejándose guiar por la oportunidad (Cassin, 2014). Afirmaremos que la improvisación del profesor sofista es una virtud intelectual y corporal que requiere tanto disciplina como *poësis*, y tanto *technê* como *praxis*. En resumen, la improvisación como una forma específica de performatividad educativa. De la mano de Rancière (1991, 2020), DiPiero (2020) y Bailey (1992), tratamos de mostrar cómo la improvisación en la enseñanza conecta con nuestros sentidos y pone en marcha simultáneamente la compartición y la unicidad de la sensación como tal, reflejada en el concepto de Rancière de *le partage du sensible* (la división de lo sensible). La improvisación, concluimos, puede entenderse como el producto de encuentros contingentes entre sujetos, objetos y entornos, donde emerge en la ruptura entre forma y contenido (DiPiero, 2020). De este modo, permite otras formas de hablar y estar en el mundo que las que desea la institucionalización de un determinado *orden político* (fijando un *partage du sensible* particular e innegociable) y por tanto se convierte, sugerimos, en un elemento central en una realización democrática de la práctica de la enseñanza.

Palabras clave: enseñanza; improvisación; democratización; sofista; platónico-aristotélico; *Partage du Sensible*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching cannot exist without improvisation. Teaching practice and its success are simply predicated on teachers' ability to balance the planned course of events with sudden ruptures and unforeseen responses on part of both the students and the overall dynamic of any classroom situation. In short, teachers need to be able to improvise, and the longer their experience, the greater becomes their competence in this delicate art of responding to, situating, and attuning to events within educational encounters that cannot be foreseen, but constantly call for attention and immediate action. Improvisation in teaching and other educational practices is not a new topic within educational research and educational philosophy. When approaching improvisation in education, there are several discussions that point towards the significance of, for example, educational tact, educational listening, and educational sensibility (Caranfa, 2007; McGuirk, 2021; van Manen, 2015; Todd, 2003). In addition, in literature on improvisation, one finds references to the practice of teaching. A popular book among musicians who wants to explore the creative aspects of music is *Free Play*, by Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990). In the book, Nachmanovitch states that

Planning an agenda of learning without knowing who is going to be there, what their strengths and weaknesses are, how they interact, prevents surprises and prevents learning. The teacher's art is to connect, in real time, the living bodies of the students with the living body of the knowledge (1990, p. 20).

Even if improvisation is considered to be an important element in teaching practice the very notion of improvisation *itself* is seldom theorized. In this article, we make the argument that improvisation is not something extra that adds flavour to teachers' repertoire or a method for the expert teacher. Rather, we claim, it is an integral and *essential* part of teaching practice. As such, improvisation is 'a practice that makes practice' (Britzman, 1991), cutting through the sometimes distancing and blurring effects of theory. In literature on improvisation as on teaching practice, one can find several accounts of their *Kairos*-nature, i.e., the experience of flow, and the ability to stay in and harness a specific creative moment in time. However, improvisation itself is seldom theorized as an educational art, but is rather discussed more or less explicitly as part of the ethical-practical side of teaching practice (Saugstad, 2002; van Manen, 2015) or as integral to the aesthetic nature of educational phenomena and processes (Caranfa, 2007; English & Doddington, 2019; Lewis, 2012). In recent years, attempts have been made to incorporate improvisation as part of the necessary part of teaching skills (see e.g., Aadland *et al.*, 2017). In addition, there are attempts to build a professional and theoretically grounded understanding of improvisation in teaching. For example, a

literature review by Holdhus *et al.* (2016), with the ambition to reach an educational contextualization of improvisation, explores the roots of improvisational practices and attends specifically to the domains of music, theatre, and rhetoric. Based on these roots and the following literary review, the writers point towards four major and essential categories of approaches to improvisation in teaching: dialogue/communication, structure/design, repertoire, and context. However, even if these categories sum up the basic tenets of improvisation they tend to lean towards a teleological understanding of education, where teaching needs improvisation to reach some predefined goals. This understanding of education and improvisation is somewhat problematic, and risks reducing improvisation into a method for teaching rather than something of further educational importance. As improvisation mostly is understood from aesthetic points of view, we would like to make clear that aesthetics and politics are very closely connected, and that this connection has bearing on a democratic understanding of education and teaching (McGuirk, 2021; Rancière, 2006; Rytzler, 2017, 2021; Säfström, 2014).

In this article, we attempt to discuss specifically the meaning, significance and centrality of improvisation for *democratic* teaching practices and their central role in public education (see e.g., Biesta, 2022; Thoilliez, 2022). Our discussion is based particularly on, on the one hand, a critique of what we refer to as a Platonian/Aristotelian notion of education and, on the other hand, a re-evaluation of the pedagogy of the Sophists and its dependence on the art of improvisation (Cassin, 2014, 2020). Improvisation of the Sophist teacher was both an intellectual and bodily virtue, requiring discipline as well as *poësis*, and *technê* as well as *praxis*. As such, improvisation becomes a specific form of educational performativity (Bailey, 1992; DiPiero, 2020; Rancière, 1991, 2020). Improvisation in teaching speaks to our senses and sets into motion simultaneously the sharing and uniqueness of sensing as such, captured by Rancière's understanding of *le partage du sensible*. Following the teaching methods of the early Sophists, we can understand improvisation as that which not only disrupts the orthodoxy of the Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy (Cassin, 2014), but also as that, which brings forth something vital in teaching practice. This helps us formulate a notion of teaching that breaks away from the ongoing and accelerating instrumentalization and un-democratization of public education (Säfström & Månsson, 2021). Improvisation, we will conclude, can be understood as the product of contingent encounters between subjects, objects, and environments, where it emerges in the rupture between form and content (DiPiero, 2020). As such, it allows for other ways of speaking and being in the world than those desired by the institutionalisation of a certain *police order*, i.e., a specific and fixed distribution of our sensible realm that makes some things possible (and other things impossible) to be heard, said, and thought (Rancière, 1999, 2006). Improvisation thus becomes a central element in a democratic realization of the teaching practice.

2. PLATONIAN/ARISTOTELIAN TEACHING

The split between Sophist teaching and Platonian/Aristotelian teaching is to be found in their two fundamentally different understandings of the purpose of education. On the one hand, Sophist teaching concerns the way in which we live our everyday life together with other people. On the other hand, Platonian/Aristotelian teaching strives to educate the aristocratic man as means for perfecting the state, resulting in an absolute distinction between an elite and the life of ordinary people. Teaching in such a universe is located as that which is to purify the noble, i.e., the able and capable man, and only him. He who is able to act out his eternal destiny in perfecting the state (Jaeger, 1939). There are especially two aspects of Platonian/Aristotelian teaching that we find problematic. The first aspect is their way of linking past and future (2.1.). The second aspect is their way of linking man [sic!] and state (2.2.). We will briefly discuss these aspects below.

2.1. *Linking past and future*

Important for our argument is that *arete'* for Plato and Aristoteles is firmly an expression of the noble man, the able man, which per definition only could mean the aristocrat (for Homer as well as for them). For Plato and Aristoteles, education is the process through which the aristocrat reaches his potential, which he and only he has the ability to do. Ability, being able to act, is central for all Greek culture but is owned by the aristocracy. Teaching is the process through which the given abilities of the aristocrat are refined in order to be reproduced over time. Education is construed as that which unities the past with the future by reproducing those abilities, which are considered to be founded on “the permanent truths” (Jaeger 1939, p.11) and through which the aristocracy, the elite, distinguishes itself from the ordinary man (all the way from blood and honour of the battle field to moral perfection).

Implanted within the very conception of Platonian/Aristotelian scientific educational thought then, is a particular understanding of educational time as that of reproduction of certain people as being able already to act, necessarily binding the time of education with the reproduction of the inequality of the aristocratic social order. Thus, teaching is a practice that inescapably orders the social and cultural sphere through a fundamental inequality between those who by definition has the ability to act and those who do not; between those who decides on the destiny of society and history and those who passively endure its consequences. *Time* in education here becomes the perpetual circular reproduction of a structure based on inequality. This particular understanding of temporality, as already signalling inequality, fixes education as that which guarantees a *status quo* in terms of social development. Education becomes the process through which the aristocrats are sharply distinguished them from the plant like life, as such life was defined by

Aristotle, of common men, 'women, child, animal and slave' (Cassin, 2014, p. 6) who rather than being subjects of their own acts are objects of others acting out their *arete*'. The dominant Platonian/Aristotelian education and teaching works, in other words, as a performativity of dehumanisation. This performativity is founded on an absolute distinction of who and what is and is not human, a distinction that confirms an absolute inequality of the human (the able noble man) and the inhuman (all and everyone else). Teaching is to be understood as the process of reproducing privilege and as exercising certain power structures, rather than to destabilise them in order for something new to appear. There can be no improvisation here since the meaning of the process is given, its aim, outcome as well as its content reproduced, it generate more of the same.

2.2. *Linking man and state*

The original social scene, to be reproduced through education and teaching, is for Plato also an image of a perfect state to come. This image of the perfect state is something of an organism that joints past, present, and future. Its parts all strive to fulfil this whole of perfection through education and teaching. The state organism can only accept diversity if and only if this diversity already is defined as a part of the whole and understood in relation to this whole, i.e., through a centre of power. It can only create diversity in so far as this diversity is defined as such from a given starting-point, from a fixed centre of power that reproduces itself as a necessary inequality. Platonian/Aristotelian education is not to disturb neither this inequality nor this image, and is rather valued in relation to how well it reproduces the possibilities of its realization. The success of education is here bound to how well it guarantees social stability by reproducing the *arete*' of the able man, the acting man, the aristocrat, the elite. How well it reproduces the same business as usual. Therefore, education cannot be about change, and teaching cannot be funded on improvisation, but about how to reproduce and to fixate the social order to ensure stability over time. That is, education itself has to be an expression of a fixed reality minimising surprises, while simultaneously performing teaching by reproducing and fixating the social as in and of itself as essentially unequal and unchangeable.

The highly systematised educational endeavour of Plato and Aristotle is given a clear aim: To control the everyday life, and all in it, by elevating a section of the people to be representing the highest aim of the social, and who therefore have the natural right to dominate all others through the acting out of their *arete*', refined through education and teaching. Such education naturalises inequality rather than politicising it by excluding change, and minimising unpredictability, uncertainty and ambiguity. The socio-psychological theory of education is hereafter to be uniting all citizens in a common organism of the state, which simultaneously incorporates as it divides within the image of its own superiority. That is, Platonian/Aristotelian educational thought relies on and establishes a certain ontology of domination, diversification as well as fixation

of inequality as its fundament. Such educational reality excludes improvisation by definition since improvisation instantiates the possibility of change and new beginnings.

Framed by the ontology given by a fixed educational science, it is not surprising that improvisation so seldom is discussed within the educational sciences. To understand properly the role of improvisation in teaching, and particularly what makes teaching into a process of democratization, we need to be moving away from a purely scientific understanding of education and its way of producing fixed relations between history and future (2.1.) as well as between man and state (2.2.). That does not mean that improvisation should be seen as an expression of randomness in education, but rather a necessary *intervention* into the inequalities produced by the fixing of these relations. More specifically, improvisation in education is a discursive performing intervention into an ontology of inequality. Therefore, it is also a celebration of the *poësis* of the moment and thus autotelic in its aesthetic expressions. To properly understand improvisation in teaching, we suggest, one need to embrace a Sophist insight of teaching as the making of practice in practice, as an art, and as *technê and poësis* both. In order to explore the Sophist understanding of teaching, and how this understanding relates to improvisation, we need to turn to the contemporary field of Aesthetics. There, we can find notions of improvisation that resonate with the democratic teaching practice of the Sophists.

3. IMPROVISATION. IN LIFE, IN MUSIC, AND IN EDUCATION

In contemporary Aesthetics, improvisation seems to be an elusive concept, which needs to defend itself from the point of theory. According to Derek Bailey (1992) the lack of theory on improvisation in music has to do with the nature of improvisation itself, as it concerns the practice of practice, rather than the theory of practice. Bailey notices that most books on improvisation seem to delve into musical theory, specific practices, and curious accounts of particular improvisers, rather than improvisation itself. This has to do with some obvious difficulties in approaching an exclusively practical phenomenon. As improvisation is a particular form of practice of practice it can only be mediated in or through practice. Therefore, it cannot be theorized in an intelligible way, in terms of *theoria*, as it does not exist outside of itself; it exists only in so far as it is being performed *in situ*: “In all its roles and appearances, improvisation can be considered as the celebration of the moment” (Bailey, 1992, p. 142). Improvisation starts and ends in practice, in the moment. The result is that “improvisation is rendered invisible as a phenomenon of action, and something close to inconceivable as a concern of theory” (Preston, 2012, p. 44). Hence, talking about improvisation tends to lean heavily on abstract reasoning and metaphorical discourse. Yet, adapting an aesthetic approach, especially in line with Rancière’s (1999) understanding of aesthetics and his notion of *le partage du sensible*, opens up for fruitful thinking. This approach can help inform teaching practice in ways that help setting up a territory for thinking education in which

its unpredictable and uncertain nature as well as its ethically vulnerable territories become *thinkable and graspable*.

Teaching, like musical performances, can be anything from completely planned in advanced to totally improvised, as it enfolds through the interplay and interactions between its participants. Important for our argument here, though, is that there is no contradiction between a planned course of events and the emergence of unexpected turns and shifts as these events unfold in teaching practice. We would even suggest that it is those moments of improvisation that identifies teaching as a practice of democratization regardless of how well a teaching event is planned. All performances contain elements of improvisation. Thus, the distinguishing mark of an improvisation is not to be found in discriminating between the planned/composed and the improvised. Rather, according to Dan DiPiero (2020), improvisation concerns a specific attitude towards the potentiality of the new. It signals a new beginning. As such, it concerns the emergence of a “singular constellation of possibilities and impossibilities, virtualities and actualizations that is incommensurate with every other improvisation” (DiPiero, 2020, p. 209). DiPiero claims that improvisation, when disconnected from the cultural or hierarchical presuppositions of a specific genre (or discourse), can be understood as a contingent encounter. Improvisation to him “...is properly singular each and every time it is enacted even within the same genre or discursive paradigm” (DiPiero, 2020, p. 208). This notion of improvisation speaks to education as such, as educational practices involve humans who, in their unique individuality, bring something new into an existing order, and challenges this order through their mere appearance.

According to Bertram (2021), improvisations are characterized by a specific being that is never static. He states that improvisations work through the dialectics between the expected and the unexpected, in a collective interplay of impulses and responses. Therefore, there is no real beginning of an improvisation. Every impulse is also a response. As such, improvisation unfolds through a collective creation of expectations, where the skillful improviser can acknowledge and affirm the unexpected in order to incorporate it in the course of events unfolding from moment to moment. Improvisation thus concerns the instant application of norms, constructed themselves through practice. However, it also acknowledges the possibility of changing norms when needed, through the active responsiveness of its participants (Bertram, 2021). Therefore, improvisation, as something that unfolds collectively in the present, is not predicated upon the attending to the present, but rather on the attending to the intersection, or breach, between past and future. As such, it enacts *un partage du sensible*, a partitioning of our sensible realm, that interrupts the telos of predictability, of social organization, and of the reproduction of the same hierarchical order over time (Rancière, 1999). So, in *democratic* education, improvisation works as an intervention in the realm of senses that interrupts the psycho-social hegemony of Aristotelian/Platonian

education. Instead of reproducing inequality as its condition of possibility, it makes possible other ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, i.e., it enacts democracy.

To understand further the improvisational nature of democratic education it is important to connect improvisation to something that goes beyond one individual's actions. According to Massumi (2015, as referenced in DiPiero, 2020), improvisation is rather a framework of affective and relational techniques that are directly collective. They are fundamentally participatory because they are activated in situations of encounter. As such, they are to be seen as event-factors rather than intentions (DiPiero, 2020). Teaching as improvisation, we claim, should always strive for this collectivity, by addressing and responding to plurality as well as uniqueness. Teaching thus becomes a form of being with, in which you do not unfold your own "genius" but strive for a continuous unfolding of moments in and through the collective. Bailey has stated that:

An ability to improvise can't be forced and it depends, firstly, on an understanding, developed from complete familiarity, of the musical context in which one improvises, or wishes to improvise. As this understanding develops, so the ability to improvise can develop (1992, p. 7).

Improvisation within teaching practice concerns the delicate art of identifying new territories and new spaces for perceptions. It therefore concerns the liberation of our senses and provides opportunities for the concrete experience of sharing and sensing the materiality of the moment (*i.e.*, the aesthetic unfolding of *le partage du sensible*; c.f., Bertrand, 2020; Rancière, 1999). Improvising in music as well as in teaching is the ability to attend to that which escapes contours, surfaces, and ideal forms—i.e., noises, sounds, and textures – that which is the true material of any educational practice worthy of the name. It is, as Nachmanovitch (1990) states, about going from competence to presence. To Bertrand (2020), improvisation can be understood as a normative practice that is grounded in performative, perceptual, and evaluative skills.

These above notions of improvisation harmonize with critical discussions that explore ways of thinking that can help us break away from those circles of stultification, identification, and domination that constantly are reproduced in the Aristotelian/Platonian ideal of education. In particular, the aesthetics of Rancière sets into motion a performativity through which we can approach improvisation in teaching in terms of creative confrontations rather than in terms of striving for intelligible development. Instead of letting learning, i.e., learning to adapt to the status quo of an unequal order, be the ultimate goal of teaching, teaching practice as improvisation would then be about being constantly aware of the possibilities for everyone that participates to bring or to add something relevant to the course of events. Teaching, in the Aristotelian/Platonian sense, affirms and reproduces a police order (*i.e.*, a fixed *partage du sensible*), by ignoring everything that deviates from this order or is made invisible and unthinkable through the order

itself. However, teaching as improvisation must always seek to confront a certain “splendor of the insignificant” (Kaltenecker, 2020, p. 103), as it emerges in the event of a sudden re-partitioning of the sensible realm. Only then, in the event of a reconfiguration of the senses and sensibilities, can that which did not have a place and those who did not have a voice take part in the collective plurality of improvisation within the democratic teaching event. This is possible if we move away from the scientific paradigm of teaching and turn to the improvisation based teaching of the Sophists.

4. SOPHIST IMPROVISATION AND TEACHING AS DEMOCRATIZATION

Improvisation, as integral to teaching practice, cannot be understood by means of the theoretical ideals of Platonian/Aristotelian education. In this scientific and idealistic version of education, improvisation would be entangled with the instrumentalism of a certain *telos*, in which each moment leads to the next in order for the final whole of fulfilment to give meaning to the whole chain of events that precedes it (i.e., fixing the links between history and future, man and state). The steps are already given in relation to the end goal and, in teaching, need to have a set goal to be reproduced outside of the moment itself. This goal gives meaning to each moment of improvisation and therefore already fixes the act as imperative for a certain goal outside of itself. Such understanding of improvisation seems to be taking some very important aspects away from the act, by reducing it to an instrument for given ends, rather than as a play in the moment. It places improvisation as a tool for a teacher to act in relation to a set goal rather than being dependent on play and on a sense of heightened collective relationality, implied by play that breaks away from the constant reproduction of the same. Improvisation in democratic education must always signal a kind of heightened presence of relationality, of being *with* others (c.f., McGuirk, 2021) beyond them being fixed as others. As such, it belongs to a way of thinking and being in the world as established by the Sophists, in which education concerns how to be moving among and with others in the spatial-temporal everydayness of the world, and ultimately embodying the virtues of democracy.

Improvisation is not a particular way of doing things but rather an ability to navigate in the interactive entanglement of subjects, objects, and environments (DiPiero, 2020). It is a non-discriminatory ability, not owned only by certain people, but shared equally among humans, and thus seems to be the fundamental modus of Sophist teaching. Sophist teaching was not an application of an ideal theory that replicated the eternity of ideas and from which practice was to be derived. This collective relationality was dependent on the ability to act in concert with others and without striving for a goal that exists outside of the moment of improvisation itself. The teaching of the Sophists did not intend to purify the essence of man as a reflection of a certain state (and mind) to be perfected, but about

how to live well with other people across difference in the here and now. The Sophists were democrats for which equality was foundational. As such, Sophist teaching was a specific practice, enacted from within the practice itself as well as speaking to practice as such. This was made possible through their delicate use of improvisational skills performed in concert with everyone participating in the teaching practice, 'led by opportunity' (Cassin 2014, p.92) rather than by a pre-set map. This improvisation based teaching was about being 'wide awake', to use Maxine Greene's (1995) expression, as well as being attuned to the unfolding of the present, in which people lived their life. Thus, as a teacher, one needed to be fully 'aware' of one's own situation and of the situation of others. The content of Sophist teaching concerned how to move in concert with those others with whom one lived, regardless if they were common men, women, child animal or slave. The improvisational skills of the Sophists, together with the aesthetic functions of improvisation itself, thus introduced an opening in the 'business as usual' of elitist education by emphasising the *poësis* of the teaching event, as the very characteristics of teaching. This *poësis* was that which could signal something new within the teaching event and thus introduce a possibility, for those taking part in the event, to "dis-identify" (Rancière, 1991, p. 98) with the set order of inequality. The message from Sophist teaching was that *anyone* could be *taught*, not only the elite. The Sophists held that teaching lead to an embodied *arete*' through all of the city-state, and for them *anyone* could be taught to embody *arete*' as an expression of democratic culture, that is to embody equality as the first principle of a political and ethical life.

Sophist teaching was the voice of practice *in* practise, and as such improvisational at its core. *Improvisation* in teaching, as practiced by the Sophists, thus *instantiates* the possibility of difference and plurality through destabilising the given order of 'ontological' inequality. Furthermore, as an enactment of *le partage du sensible*, improvisation problematises inequality as a necessary condition for education. It brings us out of the domination of Platonian/Aristotelian scientific educational thought over the everyday practice of teaching in which improvisation is a necessity. Improvisation, therefore, we suggest, is to be understood as *autotelic* in its expressions and as such, something that breaks away from fixed orders by carrying its own aim. Improvisation is always announcing the new. It signals a new beginning that necessarily is dependent on relationality. It also signals the being within a moment, which carries its own purpose successively unfolding in the present. As such, improvisation breaks away from Platonian/Aristotelian scientific education, which cannot tolerate change which is not already accounted for in the *telos* of predictability. For the Sophists, improvisation is rather signalling the aesthetic experience of *poësis*; it signals the new, and offers a new beginning in the present, which leads to the emergence of the *Kairos*. *Kairos* is "the moment of the opening of possibilities" (Cassin, 2014, p. 93), recognisable in teaching as the moment in which one addresses the student as a person beyond his or her

identity or as a student of a particular order. This moment is characterized by “both opening and cutting” (p. 93) into the order in which the student is identified as already belonging to a particular place in the hierarchical order of inequality. It is a moment in teaching in which a person speaks in a way that they have never spoken before, neither repeating what was already said nor responding to the desires of the institution, and thus brings something into existence that did not exist before. A moment that unfolds from within the act of teaching.

Technê in teaching is the art of hearing and verifying someone as speaking (in its most total sense) and guiding the unfolding of the newness of the moment. However, improvisation in teaching practice cannot and should not be fettered to the here and now of the *singular* unique moment. Teaching is of course predicated upon a certain attention to the here and now, but it is also a practice that attends to a plurality of moments. Therefore, it is not about becoming one with being, but about exploring possible and other ways of being, in concert with a plurality of other people and their contributions to the scene. The significance of teaching as a series of unfolding of moments or events is also the reason why the effects of teaching are unique in their *poësis* and singularity and not possible to generalise. At the same time, *technê* in teaching is the art of keeping the process moving, and teaching becomes *praxis*, a democratization-process of the events that unfold through the participation of others.

Platonian/Aristotelian education works against democratization and the poetic act in teaching, in the exact moment when the singularity of the one speaking is generalised and conceptualised, in order to return through Theory (science, scientific, scientism) to *dominate* the speech of all involved. Such education and teaching dominate through how a speaking person becomes a thing (concept) in schooling, through setting up a *telos* outside the singularity of the moment and to which all have to adapt; “and all we have to do is to follow the predetermined route” (Cassin, 2014, p. 94). Such *telos* closes and restricts the poetic activity in education. It controls *poësis* through *technê* when the latter is made into a science, controlling teaching and linking it to a predetermined route to a given goal. Improvisation, the poetic activity in teaching, opens a plurality of possibilities in those moments in which multiple beginnings and purposes continuously unfold. To compare those beginnings and to link them is a way of expanding who can be seen and heard and of introducing multiple ways in which one can move *with* others across difference in the classroom (and in the world at large). The improvisational nature of teaching, then, hinders teaching from being an activity that secures the *stasis* of an original scene of the social. Instead of striving for the reproduction of the organisation of the state, it speaks to a different social scene in which democratization is located precisely in the unfolding of new beginnings, as they take place in the manifold of voices and improvisational moments in the concrete classroom. The democratic teaching of the Sophists and its improvisational

nature make room for the coming into presence of students as unique beings, and their possibilities for taking place in the world of other unique beings.

5. TEACHING AS IMPROVISATION

Every lesson is unique to every new situation because of the context, because of its participants, and because of their different responses to the subject matter, as presented by the teacher differently each time. However, if a specific purpose to teaching is to investigate and to seek improvisational gestures, one should train one's ability to act upon the new and unexpected, i.e., to develop "...the discipline of mutual awareness, consideration, listening, willingness to be subtle" (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 97). In improvised music, the meaning and significance of a singular note always appears in relation to which notes that have been played before and which notes that will be played next. As such is the process of teaching dependent on teachers' ability to let the moment guide them in their encounter with the students. Teaching does not exist independently from students or from a particular subject. It is predicated upon the constant unfolding of moments and situations set to motion in a dynamic interplay between situations, things, persons in the lived classroom as well as in everyday life. In this article, we have addressed the centrality of improvisation for teaching, by contrasting the notion of Sophist teaching with Platonian/Aristotelian teaching (Säfström, 2022; Cassin, 2014, 2020). Furthermore, by combining this critique with an aesthetic and political understanding of improvisation, both as a musical and educational practice (Rancière, 1991, 2020; DiPiero, 2020; Bailey, 1992), we have highlighted the *educational* specificities of Sophist teaching, where improvisation works as an integral and fundamental element of 'collectivity'. In the Platonian/Aristotelian notion of education, the goal or end of teaching never comes as a surprise, at least not on part of the teacher, since the *virtue* that students gain is an eternal *virtue* belonging to certain people that already existed within them or within the culture to which they belong. Students are then measured, sorted, and hierarchized in relation to the ultimate *virtue* of the noble, able, man, ultimately reproducing an absolute inequality. Therefore, this notion cannot be the basis of any teaching that strives for the becoming of unique subjects in a democratic community founded on equality. Furthermore, it cannot function as an ethical and political response to the plurality of the human condition; it rather strives to overcome such plurality.

In order to be able to acknowledge the improvisation that takes place in any classroom, in any situation of teaching, and to make it graspable and thinkable as a necessary element in teaching practice, we must turn away from the Platonian/Aristotelian conception of education. Instead, we need to go along with the teaching of the early Sophists, which did not focus on the reproduction of a given order of inequality in which only some made sense at the cost of others. Following the

Sophists, improvisation is that which makes teaching into a practice of democratization. Improvisation for the Sophists meant to be able to speak about everything and with anyone, and to work with what is given in each particular educational situation. Improvisation means to acknowledge the equality in speech as well as the possibility of all having a voice. Sophist *virtue* is equality, and teaching by necessity is to verify equality. The improvisation of the Sophist teacher was an intellectual and a bodily *virtue* that required discipline as well as *poësis*, *technê* as well as *praxis*. Therefore, such teaching makes practice of practice in order to link different worlds across difference – teaching becomes an act of democratization. As such, it expands the range of democratic space and place, and it expands the possibility to appear on a social scene that constantly renews itself.

The necessary connection between *poësis* and *technê* in improvisation has been captured nicely by the Afro-American musician, Leo Wadada Smith who claims that: "...technique for the improviser is not an arbitrary consumption of abstract standardized method but rather a direct attunement with the mental, spiritual and mechanical energy necessary to express a full creative impulse" (interviewed by Derek Bailey, in Bailey, 1992, p. 99). The skilled improvising teacher is therefore someone who has developed a heightened sensibility to the concrete as well as the spiritual nature of teaching practice, as it comes to life in a relational and dynamic unfolding in the present. This calls for a creative ability that follows the words of Stephen Nachmanovitch who has stated that:

There is no chaos; there is a vast, living world in which the rules for specifying the pattern are so complicated that after you look at a few of them you become tired. The creative act pulls out some more inclusive shape or progression that gathers an immense amount of complexity into a simple, satisfying notion. (Nachmanovitch, 1990, p. 106).

We claim that the improvisational nature of teaching practice can be understood as a creative vigilance of sorts. The improvising teacher always comes prepared, stays on their toes, and pays attention to the unfolding of the collectivity of the present. Instead of linking past and future in terms of reproduction of certain positions in the social, they attend to and nurture the successive unfolding of the newness of each singular moment. Improvisation in teaching is about a specific attending to the delicacy of the educational events as they unfold from moment to moment (c.f., McGuirk, 2021). It is about opening paths and possibilities for all involved, that neither the teacher nor the students were aware existed. Teaching, as improvisation, is very much about being in the surrender business (Bailey, 1992), about affirming the risk of education (Säfström, 2003); it is about accepting the premise of acting within the time scope of a single breath. It is about knowing what might happen but not what actually *will* happen. It is about developing a comfortable attitude towards not knowing. It is about daring to go for it and to be able to fail and then pick up from where you got lost. The improvising teacher is

responsible for the insertion as well as the exclusion of the 'tonal center' of the teaching event.

6. FINALE

With the Sophist teacher in mind, improvisational teaching is the delicate practice of responding to, situating, and attuning to events within educational encounters that cannot be foreseen, but constantly call for attention and action through the finest virtue of our intellect at play. It requires, as Nachmanovitch (1990, p. 97) says 'a willingness to be subtle'. As such, it performs democratization by being a collective practice that makes practice, a praxis in which all participants take their place through the unfolding moment, and in which they appear as speaking beings on the scene. It allows for the liberation from a given police order to the exploration of new ways of being with others, in which the implicit equality of the aesthetic moment in the collective is set into play. It makes new territories thinkable and graspable, it makes sense of teaching, or rather, it is teaching as making sense.

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