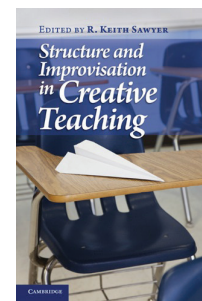


Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching

By R. Keith Sawyer
Cambridge University Press, 2011



In terms of classroom instruction, including music instruction, exactly how much structure is necessary for a creative learning environment? Some structure is necessary for effective teaching, but too much structure can inhibit students' creative behaviors. *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching* sheds new light on this issue. The book, published by Cambridge University Press in 2011 and edited by Keith Sawyer, is composed of thirteen chapter-essays written by authors from an array of disciplines. Throughout the book, the authors explore the interaction between structure and improvisation within many diverse situations, from mathematics and English-language learning classrooms to professional theaters and dance choreography settings. Though its target audience is not specifically music teachers, the book is filled with valuable information that is particularly relevant in a music classroom setting. Music teachers of all levels will benefit from this tremendous book.

In the introductory chapter, Sawyer outlines a curious conundrum that has emerged in the research literature regarding experienced teachers. First, experienced teachers tend to have a larger repertoire of scripts than novice teachers, including "ready-made" responses to students and standard instructional routines for use in their classrooms. Experienced teachers also tend to demonstrate more flexibility and improvisation based on the relatively unpredictable paths that different classes might take. In other words, according to the research findings, experienced teachers have more structures in place but also improvise more! Throughout the book, the authors use the term *improvisation* to describe the flexibility that a teacher demonstrates

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within classroom instruction, not specifically musical improvisational skills per se.

This counterpoint between structure and improvisation is what Sassi calls a "delicate balancing act" (p. 209).

The purpose of this book is to explore the balance between classroom structure and improvisation to encourage effective and creative teaching practices. As a framework for exploring this balance, Sawyer introduces three inherent paradoxes:

- The *teacher paradox*, which is centered on the challenging role of the teacher, implies that teachers must exercise their own expertise

in a logically structured manner while also being open to flexibility and improvisation.

- The *learning paradox* is apparent in classrooms where teachers guide students' learning through scaffolds. Scaffolds provide some organization, but they are loose enough to allow for some improvisation and flexibility.
- The *curriculum paradox*, which has especially come to fruition since the No Child Left Behind Act, reflects the importance of standardized curricula and lesson plans. Research shows that standardized curricula and lesson plans are useful in planning for instruction but, on the other hand, the most effective plans allow for improvisation and flexibility.

Within each of the chapters, the authors describe unique aspects of the tension between structure and improvisation based on one of the paradoxes listed above. In one chapter, DeZutter outlines the potential benefits of professional stage improvisation training for teachers. She maintains that stage improvisation training would benefit teachers because they often lack training in improvisational skills necessary for effective teaching. In another chapter, Kurtz describes his use of guided improvisation activities with English-language learners. In another chapter, Erickson examines classroom conversations as improvisation and provides samples of conversations that highlight their improvisational nature. Essentially, creative teaching involves interplay between structure and improvisation, and the best teachers maneuver between these with a grace and ease that can be learned only through practice. Throughout the book, this is called



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disciplined improvisation. Like great jazz musicians, teachers can develop good classroom improvisational skills only through a disciplined approach. Improvisational skills do not emerge without appropriate training and practice.

The strength of the book lies in its wide coverage of many settings and its engaging writing style. The authors support their arguments with findings from current research, and they articulate these arguments in a thoughtful and lucid manner. *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching* is a gem—one of those works in which careful research is presented in a warm, inviting writing style appropriate for a large audience of both novice and experienced teachers. In the foreword of the book, David Berliner declares, "I've argued that schools today are excessively reliant on structuring techniques. If we want our students to learn higher-level skills, including creativity and critical thinking, structures and scripts cannot get us there. So are you confused? Wondering what is the best balance between structure, improvisation, and creativity? That is why this book should be widely read and discussed!" (p. xvi).

Any teachers who have battled with the above issues should consider purchasing this exciting and influential book. ■

D. Gregory Springer is a doctoral candidate and teaching assistant at the University of Kentucky. He completed Orff Schulwerk Levels I and II teacher education courses at the University of Kentucky. His research interests are creative behaviors in music and music perception.