



Play Who You Are: Learning from a Decade of Community Improvisation

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INTRODUCTION

For ten years, the Play Who You Are workshops, supported by the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), in collaboration with KidsAbility Centre for Child Development and the Guelph Jazz Festival, have been bringing world-class improvising musicians into creative collaboration with children and youth with special needs. Through a workshop series, the musician-facilitators work to develop the youths' musical skills, confidence, and repertoires, and the group works together to create a set of musical pieces which they then present at a free, public performance during the Guelph Jazz Festival.

This long-term, community-engaged arts-based research collaboration has explored a range of topics including teaching practices for community improvisation, adaptive instruments for musicians with diverse needs, and improvisation across levels of ability. In this poster we share some findings about:

- short- and long-term impacts of improvised arts participation
- community impacts of improvised music programming and performances

METHODS

Our research on this project is carried out by a team including support staff from partnering organizations, student researchers, and IICSI researchers. Programming and research approaches are developed in collaboration with our partners, and vary according to the needs of each group. Our methodologies can be described as improvisation-informed, community-engaged arts based research.

Planning meetings, workshops, and performances are attended by participant-observers, documented by film and/or audio, and interviews (which use open-ended questions) are recorded for future analysis. The ten-year Play Who You Are archive is a rich and generative data set, from which we continue to learn.

LIMITATIONS

We continue to explore how best to articulate the nuanced and often unspoken relationships and impacts that are generated by this project. In some cases, participants are non-verbal or choose not to share all of their experiences. In all cases, we negotiate between sharing our interpretations and letting the participants and their music speak for themselves.

FINDINGS Continued

Community Impacts

- Audience members and observers note productive disruptions to conventional ideas about dis/ability, and about who can and cannot be a 'real' musician
- Improvising together enables relationship-building and deepens community cohesion beyond the scope of the workshop

I think of improvisation [as] building relationships with community members that didn't exist before – in music.
- PWYA Facilitator



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Drawing on a decade of interviews and observations – with youth participants, support staff, and family members; with musician-facilitators, audience members, and researchers – we have identified the following key research findings about the process and impacts of the Play Who You Are improvised music workshops and performances.

Impacts for Youth participants

- Youth report increased self-confidence, as musicians and in their social relationships
- Youth describe satisfaction at having faced a new challenge and successfully met their goals
- Improvised music offers a mode of power-sharing and co-creation that enables youth to take risks, and to learn, without fear of judgment or failure
- Improvising together creates conditions for trust-building, interpersonal connection, and community formation

[The musician was] facilitating the music, but the music was facilitating the relationships.

- IICSI Researcher

- Staff and parents observe that youth develop the confidence to take on roles (eg conducting the group; performing for an audience) that are new to them
- Staff and parents observe increased self-expression, through music

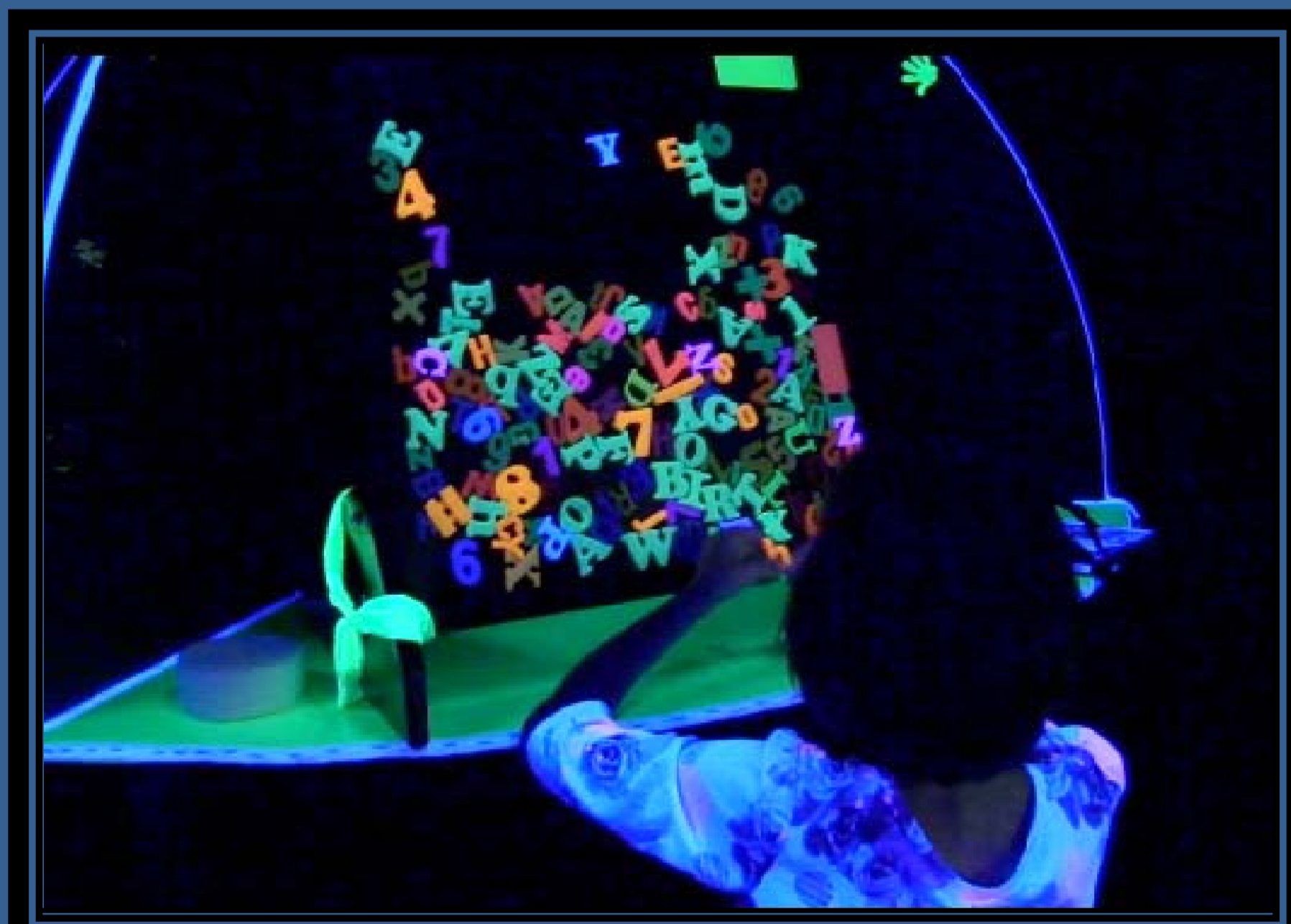


LEARNING OUTWARD: BROADER IMPLICATIONS

We agree with the youth participant quoted at the top of this poster: the world would be a much nicer place – more inclusive, with more confident and collaborative people, and more cohesive communities – if we took seriously the principles of musical improvisation. Power-sharing, confident risk-taking, careful and responsive listening, and collaborative creation all contribute to the creation of safe and healthy communities.

As Heble et al note in their analysis of Play Who You Are activities, “when students become active participants in the production of knowledge [...] they model new kinds of relationships, and they become engaged and curious listeners; they begin, in effect, to hear and to play the world anew.” We will continue to explore and expand the ways in which improvised community music can contribute to the ongoing creation of a better world, in which people of all abilities and identities are able, and welcome, to play who they are.

*If people talked the way they
[play] in improvisation,
Then I think the world would be
a lot nicer...*
- Play Who You Are Youth Participant



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