



60-180 MINS

# Principled Improvisation

Authored by Susan Jurow, Bill Penuel, & Leah Peña Teeters

\*Adaptation note: This activity is designed to be modified and adapted as it makes most sense in the context of design.

## Activity Rationale and Aims

### Aims

01. To collaboratively identify explicit and implicit elements and structures of the designed activity
02. To collaboratively imagine how to adapt certain elements and structures in a new setting

### Rationale

Learning and development is contextually bound and socially situated. Practices that work in one setting may not work in another. Thus, when sharing collaboratively designed practices and processes across contexts, it is important to identify which elements of the practice are contextually bound and should be adapted (or discarded) for a new context and which (if any) are core practices tied to the theory of learning

that could be applicable across settings. When sharing designed plans with other practitioners, it is helpful to consider: how can you give users a template that helps them understand how to modify the practices for their context? How can you label the activities to make more visible how and why activities work together and to what extent they are contextually bound and/or generalizable?



# In Person Steps

## 01.

As a whole group, articulate the designed product's (e.g., intervention, curriculum) theory of learning and/or change. Discuss how that theory shows up in the designed product.

## 02.

Break the design team into small groups. Provide each group with a template of a collaboratively designed product, such as a lesson plan or protocol. Instruct the team to provide a high-level, bulleted outline of the “elements of a performance” (e.g., a lesson plan may have a warm-up, didactic instruction, collaborative work, and closing as well as strategies of questioning, scaffolding, relationship building).

## 03.

Building off of the musical performance metaphor, consider: What can be adapted and how and what should be preserved in its original form?

- a. What are the activities that are central to support learning or behavior change? These activities can be thought of as “consistent activities” that need to be in place for the theory of learning/change to be actualized, regardless of context.
  - i. For example, every performance may have the same instruments, and draw on a rehearsed series of songs. In the focal designed activity, consider what are the consistent elements? How does that map onto the theory of change?

- ii. In a designed activity, these activities may be activities that activate a theory of learning change.

- b. What are the activities that are supporting the “consistent activities” and can be improvised upon?

- i. For example, a strong musical performance necessarily adapts to the venue and the audience. A strong band knows how to riff off of one another and adapt the rehearsed songs. In the research design, what are the places that necessitate “principled improvisation?”

- ii. In your template, identify which elements can/should be improvised. In a designed activity, this may be the learning scaffolds, discussion questions, medium of delivery, structure for building relationships, or modality of interaction.

## 05.

After identifying the elements and structures of the designed activity, engage in a whole group discussion:

- a. Imagine a new setting and descriptively describe it (including collaborators, material resources, geographic location).
  - i. How would you know how to adapt certain elements and structures based on the new setting?
  - ii. Would the elements and structures work in another setting? What elements (i.e., infrastructure) need to be in place to support it?



## Facilitator Preparation

### MATERIALS

- Markers
- Handouts of focal design activity/protocol
- Chart paper
- Paper

## Facilitation Tips

It is important to note that not all collaboratively designed materials are intended to be shared in other contexts and may be best left to evolve in the context in which they were developed.

## Activity Summary

Hickey (2009) articulates how students find music through their own movements, singing and playing. As such, improvisation becomes a way of finding music for yourself and by yourself, a discovery rather than an imitation (Abramson, 1980, p. 62). This activity extends the metaphor of a musical performance, such as playing the blues, where there is a concrete structure as well as an integral element of improvisation, what one can think of as principled improvisation, or adaptation (Philip, 2019). Musicians carry elements of their per-

formances across settings and also identify elements that are necessarily improvised as they assess the audience, venue, and context.

In this activity, collaborators will think about their designed product as a musical performance and first list out the structures of a specific “performance” and identify which structures will be consistent across contexts and which will be necessarily improvised. Collaborators will discuss processes for successful implementation and improvisation.



## Commitments to Equity and Wellness

Sustaining designed research activity necessarily involves a reflexivity and flexibility to continue to adapt to the fluid nature of human activity. For designed activities to be culturally relevant, they need to be able to adapt to the social, cultural, and political context. Thus, it is important to make explicit how the different components of a designed activity interact with each other, making

clear the activities and theories that undergird learning/development and the ways in which they can be adapted, modified, and re-mediated (Gutiérrez, Morales, & Martinez, 2009). Articulating the interactions of different design components makes visible the ways that designed activities can be adapted so as to attend to collaborators' experiences, emotions, and wellness.



# Additional Reading

Jurow, A., & McFadden, L. (2011). Disciplined improvisation to extend young children's scientific thinking. In R. Sawyer (Ed.), *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching* (pp. 236-251). Cambridge University Press.

Kirshner, B., & Polman, J. L. (2013). Adaptation by design: A context-sensitive, dialogic approach to interventions. *National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook*, 112(2), 215-236.

Nicolopoulou, A., & Cole, M. (1993). Generation and transmission of shared knowledge in the culture of collaborative learning: The Fifth Dimension, its play-world, and its institutional contexts. In E.A. Forman, N. Minick, & C.A. Stone (Eds.), *Contexts for learning: Sociocultural dynamics in children's development* (pp.283-314). Oxford University Press.

# Works Cited

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Gutiérrez, K. D., Morales, P. Z., & Martinez, D. C. (2009). Re-mediating literacy: Culture, difference, and learning for students from nondominant communities. *Review of Research in Education*, 33(1), 212-245.

Hickey, M. (2009). Can improvisation be 'taught'? A call for free improvisation in our schools. *International Journal of Music Education*, 27(4), 285-299.

Philip, T. M. (2019). Principled improvisation to support novice teacher learning. *Teachers College Record* (1970), 121(6), 1.

