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Improvisation, Creativity and Consciousness: Life at the Academic Fringes

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My journey in higher education has taken many interesting turns, all of which have contributed to what I now regard as my central mission: to integrate creative and transpersonal/spiritual practices and study in higher education. As a student and later a scholar of jazz, I was often frustrated by the passive, fragmented, and monocultural learning approaches seemingly endemic within higher education. Given my love for teaching and developing new creative platforms for transpersonal/spiritual exploration through music, I was committed to forging a spiritual re-orientation within the academy that would be central to a new educational landscape based firmly upon praxis.

Challenging Conventionality through Jazz

Jazz serves as a wonderful complement to individual reflexivity and spiritual practice. With its improvisatory roots, jazz is not only a fertile avenue for creative development, it is also highly conducive to spiritual connections. A transpersonal approach to jazz could spawn an entirely new educational continuum for all fields: silent meditation would enable penetration to the interior dimensions of consciousness, creative exploration would enhance infusion of transcendence into thought and action, all of which would enhance the conventional mastery of skills and information that is necessary to success in a field. In contrast to education's traditional focus on knowledge as a third-person, external phenomenon, a shift toward a more inclusive approach could begin to emerge, whereby third-person objective study would occur along with first-person study of the self. This would be an approach to education where self-knowledge/self-awareness is as important as exterior mastery of one or more disciplines. This vision was as applicable to physics, literature, business, and engineering as it was to music, and even if it would involve the most extraordinary educational revolution of our times, I saw absolutely no reason why it could not be realized. Who would not embrace these ideas?

Paradigmatic Breaks & Academic Fringes

I thus had an agenda when in 1987 I was appointed to start a jazz program at the University of Michigan. While I have managed to make some inroads in pursuit of my goals, I have also become keenly aware that the obstacles to this kind of educational reform are deeply rooted within the

academic world. This is not to suggest that my enthusiasm or energy, or even my optimism, have waned. If anything, I am more determined than ever to forge ahead. But after 18 years at the fringes, the enormity of this task has never been so apparent.

In retrospect, I believe I have been blessed by the opportunity to work along three different parameters of reform. I sometimes quip to colleagues that my home in the academic world is “three paradigms off” from center, three sets of core assumptions removed from the mainstream.

My first paradigmatic departure from convention is inherent in being a jazz musician and educator in musical academe, which is largely grounded in European classical music. While jazz and classical music share common features, they are rooted in two very different cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. Classical music, at least in present times, is about the division of labor between inventor and performer; jazz is about the uniting of these roles in the improvisation process. Classical music is strongly oriented toward the past, jazz toward the present. The aesthetic locus of classical music is European in contrast to jazz’s African and African-American heritage. Classical music is an object-centered paradigm, with musical value associated with composed repertory, while jazz, which is not without its composed treasures, is more process-oriented due to its improvisatory core. This is not to deny the art of classical interpretive performance as a rich expressive process. And here it is also important to recognize earlier stages in the classical tradition when most musicians improvised and composed as well as performed. But the classical field’s current structural orientation, grounded in the art objects of European musical tradition, is very different from jazz’s post-structural orientation toward process and melding of diverse influences.

My second paradigmatic departure from convention occurred within the jazz realm. While the jazz tradition has been one of ongoing exploration of new possibilities, as well as continual homage to the treasures of the past, the exploratory component has largely been compromised in jazz education. In other words, there is a split between the jazz world and how it is studied academically. The academic orientation has undoubtedly been shaped by the obstacles jazz educators have had to face: A strong exploratory bent might have further alienated classical colleagues who already viewed jazz with skepticism; it would be much easier to focus on aspects of jazz that conformed most closely to classical models. This is likely one reason big bands have long prevailed in jazz studies programs to an inordinate degree over small group playing, even though the second format has been the more dominant evolutionary force in the music’s evolution, particularly in the past 50 years or more.

Where my work deviated from convention was in the formation of alternative and expanded approaches to improvisation that transcended the ordinary boundaries of jazz. I call this a trans-stylistic approach, in that instead of

imposing style constraints at the outset, it allows musicians to draw upon their own backgrounds so that style can manifest as a result of the process. I found this approach not only expands the horizons of jazz musicians, but also allows classical musicians unique and inviting entryways into the improvisation process. I designed a Master of Music in Improvisation curriculum that draws from a wide variety of musical influences. The core performance ensemble in this program is a group called the Creative Arts Orchestra (CAO), which is one of the few large, completely open improvising ensembles in existence. Unlike traditional jazz ensembles, which improvise within pre-ordained constraints, the CAO plays entire concerts with nothing planned in advance. Jazz saxophonists sit next to classical cellists who sit next to rock guitarists, resulting in music that melds the rich array of streams of our world into a coherent and often magical hybrid. The group recently performed at the Contemplative Studies conference at Columbia University.

The Creative Arts Orchestra was not just a forum for innovation in jazz and musical study, it also spawned the third and perhaps most significant of my paradigmatic breaks from convention, what I call consciousness studies. From early on, I would have CAO members meditate during rehearsals and prior to concerts. Tapping into interior regions of silence enhanced spontaneity, invention, and a kind of inter-subjective communion between musicians, and musicians and audience, that is uniquely possible in improvised music. Stephen Nachmanovitch talks about “performers, audience, instruments, the room, the night outside, space, become one being, pulsing.”¹

While all along I entertained the thought of creating coursework and even an entire curriculum where meditation and related studies were central, I had difficulty finding an opening to pursue that goal. In 1997, that all changed when I received a Contemplative Practice fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies. This new program was formed to promote the use of meditation in college and university courses, and to date has enabled such coursework to be implemented at over 80 institutions, including Amherst College, Brown, Columbia, Harvard, Michigan, UMass, and Yale. I was fortunate to be among the first round of fellows in this program and with its support designed a course called Creativity and Consciousness. As the course became highly popular, it dawned on me that the time may have come to design a curriculum with a meditation component. I drafted a proposal for a Bachelor of Musical Arts in Jazz and Contemplative Studies degree and submitted it to the School of Music curriculum committee. The plan called for a full slate of jazz and overall musical courses, electives, and about 25 credits of coursework, from within the school of music and across the university at large, involving meditation practice and related studies.

Soon after receiving approval for the Jazz and Contemplative Studies degree program, I also formed the Faculty Network for Creativity and

¹ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Freeplay: Improvisation in Life and the Arts*. (1990, p.101)

Consciousness Studies, in hopes that a cross-campus forum would further enhance my initial agenda to bring spiritual practice to higher education. I also was happy to see that an increasingly broad cross-section of students from across campus began taking advantage of the course offerings that were in place. In the past few years, student athletes have been taking classes in the Creativity and Consciousness programs. Imagine 300 lb football players, aspiring opera divas and jazz musicians, engineering students, and physics majors sitting side-by-side deep in meditation, and then discussing their experiences. A footballer conveyed in one of his papers having a terrible day at practice, getting chewed out by the coaching staff, and coming to my class and experiencing a level of happiness in and after meditation unlike anything that he had known before. Nothing has been more fulfilling in my experience as a teacher than hearing this kind of feedback.

What also excites me about this work is the capacity for it to enhance conventional learning. The coming educational revolution is not about rejecting conventional learning modalities, but rather placing that within an expanded context that also includes first-person meditation and related practices that probe the interior dimensions of consciousness. I believe consciousness studies has the capacity to open up entirely new pathways to intellectual rigor and interdisciplinary connections, because it allows these connections to be made from a deeper and more integrated source. Meditating students have unique access to a wide range of areas, including brain-mind connections, models of consciousness, cross-cultural studies of spiritual traditions, and notions about human creativity.

The Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies

The Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies at Michigan (PCCS) was approved by the Provost in spring 2004 and has received funding for this fall. This program will host a guest speaker series and will develop a number of courses, in hopes of establishing a campus-wide degree in Creativity and Consciousness Studies.

In designing this campus-wide program, I was forced to deliberate over the following: *What is knowledge? What does it mean to be educated in today's world? What is the role of the modern university in preparing students to not only enter the workforce, but also to thrive within and contribute to a world increasingly characterized by change, unpredictability, and a complex network of environmental and social challenges? What is the place of inner fulfillment, spirituality, self-knowledge, and emotional and interpersonal development in the educational process? What might this new epistemological spectrum entail?*

These kinds of questions have long been central to debates on educational reform, and suggest the need for educational models to aim toward a broader vision of human development. Parker Palmer, in his fall 2002 address at

the 40th anniversary of the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at UM, advocated the embrace of “new epistemologies,” or new ways of knowing, as central to an expanded view of education for our times.

The Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies (PCCS) responds to these questions by delineating a new educational continuum, where arts, creativity, community outreach, and transpersonal or contemplative experiences are integrated with conventional approaches to learning. The result is a range of investigation that combines the best of traditional experiences with new approaches that are at the cutting-edge of educational practice and thought.

Arts and creativity studies cultivate inventiveness, adaptability, interactive skills, the ability to synthesize principles from diverse areas, personal and interpersonal connections, and a richly multi-ethnic aesthetic awareness. Community outreach experiences link the educational enterprise to the outside world, which not only renders classroom learning highly meaningful, but also cultivates in students sensitivity to and understanding of their social environment. Contemplative/consciousness studies involves the use of meditation and related practices that have been shown to promote mental clarity, ability to focus, inner well-being, freedom from anxiety, creativity, self-sufficiency, insight, compassion, and a number of other attributes. The wide array of theoretical and cultural connections inherent in contemplative studies enables this field to directly combine inner explorations with more conventional kinds of academic inquiry, thus juxtaposing the capacities for rigor and personal/transpersonal reflection.

By integrating systematic ways of probing interior dimensions of consciousness, creative exploration, and conventional academic disciplines, The Program in Creativity and Consciousness Studies lays groundwork for an entirely new educational continuum for the 21st century.

The PCCS will bring this continuum of experiences to the university community through three types of activities, all of which are currently underway to varying degrees, and in relatively isolated pockets:

1. Dialogue and events to promote awareness of creativity and consciousness studies.
2. Course and curriculum design.
3. Research.

Conceptualizing a New Educational Landscape for Higher Education

The current time is one of extraordinary opportunity and need for this kind of shift in the educational world. It is a time when those inclined to work toward these ends should persevere despite the obstacles, for what is at stake is nothing less than the fulfillment of what education is arguably all about. It is amazing how rapidly interest in this area is growing. At the same time, the enormity of the

task cannot be underestimated. Networking will be key, both within institutions, and between institutions. In this regard, I am in the process of forming an organization called STATE: Students, Teachers, and Administrators for Transpersonal Education. The purpose of STATE is to bring together those working toward a spiritual transformation in higher education in a powerful collective voice that cannot be ignored. Key to STATE will be the formation of student chapters at as many schools as possible across the nation and world. For more information, log on to www.statenow.org. In my view, there is no more exciting or important project to pursue than the integration of spirituality in higher education.

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