

The ArtsCan Circle: Using Arts and Improvisation in the Classroom

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The ArtsCan Circle is an independent, volunteer-run organization that links at-risk Native youth with the arts in northern Canada. According to ArtsCan Circle, “Our hope is to encourage self-esteem amongst Native youth in isolated communities through a cooperative exploration of the arts” (“The ArtsCan Circle”). Founded by harmonica player Mike Stevens in the early 2000s, this project has expanded and now includes dozens of artists travelling to communities in northern Ontario, Labrador, and Nunavut where they facilitate arts workshops in schools and community centres. Activities include song writing, instrumental workshops, theatre, and visual arts. One of the organization’s mandates is to make repeated trips to the same communities to help establish relationships with the children, schools and the broader community. This essay will focus on the creative and improvisational processes that occur in the ArtsCan workshops. Research is based on personal correspondence with an active musician facilitator, participation in a harmonica playing workshop led by Mike Stevens, and information available through various media publications.

Improvisation is frequently used in the musical and theatrical workshops facilitated by ArtsCan volunteers and can manifest itself in many different ways. Magoo is a singer-songwriter who facilitates song writing and instrumental workshops across Ontario and for ArtsCan Circle. In a personal interview, Magoo spoke of the process of improvising, and said that when you are improvising with others you are interacting with others and playing off what they are playing. Participants and facilitators can react to one another’s reactions and try to create a musical conversation. Like a spoken conversation,

musical improvisation allows for the expression of in-the-moment feelings, which can be constrained by the exclusive use of pre-composed music.

Song composition is a regular activity in ArtsCan workshops. The word “song-writing” may appear to be anything but improvisatory, but the collaborative creation of this music uses improvisational processes. These workshops establish a time and space where participants can create brand new music together. When facilitating a song writing workshop, Magoo presents participants with a number of options about the basic structure of the song. Together as a class they make decisions about the song structure, choosing such elements as time signature, rhythm, and chord progressions. According to Magoo, the first half of the workshop is always the most difficult- he can be faced with a group of close-mouthed, shy kids that are doing their best to avoid all eye contact.

Sometimes students get up and walk out of the classroom. The opening process of choosing a framework to work within is important, because it gives them a foundation from which to depart. He notes that it is difficult to get participants to contribute without some initial suggestions and examples. When they hear some structural ideas it gives everyone something from which to work. They also choose the subject matter of the song together based on what is going on in their lives; topics could be about what they are studying in school, an upcoming festival, etc. It usually takes a couple of enthusiastic people to start making suggestions and then the song-writing really gets going.

Participants make suggestions for lyrics and melody, and decisions about what to include are made together. Sometimes a student will suddenly come up with a full line complete with lyrics and melody, and sometimes the verses are written bit by bit. It is a collective

process that has a tangible end result; often the results are recorded and/or performed for a wider community audience, giving all participants a sense of achievement. Magoo notes that this sense of accomplishment can be extremely important for the participants.

Creating a piece of music gives them something that is brand new and their own which is very rewarding. Also, the processes of creating this music can be a good way for participants and facilitators to engage and interact with one another.

The instrumental workshops are another opportunity for everyone to make music. Many participants (both students and teachers) have never played an instrument before. Schools may not have music teachers or supplies. ArtsCan has run workshops on guitar, ukulele, harmonica, and marimba, and set up instrument libraries in many communities. Ukulele and harmonica are popular instruments to use in starting a music program because they are small, affordable, and the basics of these instruments are easy to learn. Facilitators will teach basic technique of the instrument such as how to hold it, and some notes/chords, and then students may learn a song or two using this knowledge. Participants are also given the opportunity to just go wild and play. In his learn-to-play harmonica workshops, Mike Stevens shows participants how the harmonica can be used to express emotions, and then he asks for suggestions. At the request of the audience he will play happy, sad, scared, confused, and show the participants how they too can use the instruments to play what it is they are feeling at the moment. Bringing instruments into the classroom and allowing students to play gives them an opportunity to express themselves in a new way. The following is testimonial from a Music teacher in Natuashish, Labrador, whose students participated in ArtsCan workshops:

“I just want to thank the ArtsCanCircle team for coming to our school as the kids were very touched by the experience. They continue to talk about their experiences and are even more eager to grow as musicians. The level four student who received the guitar was extremely grateful and has even started composing his own music. He recently received his college application papers and says he would love to continue his education in the music field” (“ArtsCan” brochure).

As noted previously, ArtsCan’s repeated visits to communities means that they can have both short and long-term impacts. From the beginning Mike Stevens was adamant that repeat trips to communities were important to create a lasting impact:

“A lot of people have been going into these communities and then never coming back again and the kids can see right through that stuff immediately. The way to get respect is to go back and to keep going back. Kids are smart. I guess what I'm trying to say is the music, the arts, and us, can make a big change that a lot of the programs up to now can't do. I've seen it happen” (Stevens).

Through participating in a workshop run by Mike Stevens and speaking with Magoo it becomes clear that while improvisation is not a central mandate of the ArtsCan workshops, it is a tool that helps the workshops to run successfully. It seems that a level of flexibility is required in the workshops to make room for reactions from participants (such as little interest in contributing or fifteen different ideas at once) and to incorporate current and relevant ideas in the creative process. In this way participants can write a song about something they saw that day, or play a feeling on the harmonica. Magoo noted that it can be difficult to predict where a workshop might go, and all of a sudden everyone might start playing a tune that he never would have expected. ArtsCan Circle is

making positive impacts on people in northern Canadian communities and the improvisatory practises they employ are one of many practices that help to keep participants involved and making music.

Works Cited

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