

**The Poetics of Life**  
**COVID-19, Improvising Alternatives, and the Musical Learning Community**

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Article abstract

We are a group of musicians, artists, and educators who founded the Musical Learning Community within the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA). From Ecuador, Sebastián is a teaching artist working in a rural public conservatory in Amaguaña and David is a faculty member in a private university in Quito. Cristina is a dancer and educator working in Indonesia, while Víctor is an action researcher working from Miami. Natalie and Joshua are music educators in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. For the six of us, collaborating as an action research community has allowed our work to transcend our unique settings. In this article, through videos, testimonies, and collaborative analysis, we share our experiences in a way that resonates more like a chorus than the voice of a soloist.

## **The Poetics of Life: COVID-19, Improvising Alternatives, and the Musical Learning Community**

**Víctor Manuel Rubio Carrillo, Joshua Argueta, Natalie Vanessa Lopez, David Echeverría, Cristina Duque, and Sebastián López**

We are all now actors in the most radical play of the millennium thus far. Despite the pandemic preparedness exercises hosted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in October 2019, many were taken by surprise when the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China was identified as a novel coronavirus. This text reflects on how the global pandemic led our *Musical Learning Community* to improvise and create alternative cultural practices.

### **Musical Learning Community and Action Research**

We are a group of musicians, artists, and educators who founded the Musical Learning Community within the Action Research Network of the Americas (ARNA). From Ecuador, Sebastián is a teaching artist working in a rural public conservatory in Amaguaña and David is a faculty member in a private university in Quito. Cristina is a dancer and educator working in Indonesia, while Víctor is an action researcher working from Miami. Natalie and Joshua are music educators in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. For the six of us, collaborating as an action research community has allowed our work to transcend our unique settings. The work became a shared experience where we learned together not only what was similar among our situations, but also what was different—helping us revise our understanding of normality. As we came to know new people, new scenarios, new challenges, and new perspectives, we have grown in unexpected and unprecedented ways.

Action research pairs a progressive outlook with a philosophy of sustainable improvement through recognizing multiple voices. It is an attitude shared by artists, as our artistry is an ongoing process. When defining progress and improvement, however, there is a challenge: progress can be ambiguous and contextual. As Kenneth Burke suggests, “We take it for granted insofar as men [sic] cannot themselves create the universe, there must remain something essentially enigmatic [. . .] this underlying enigma will manifest itself in inevitable ambiguities and inconsistencies” (xviii). These ambiguities call for different perspectives regarding progress and improvement. Recognizing where voices are speaking, and learning from them in order to create what would have been impossible in isolation, are improvisatory acts that sustain collective power. The work we present here is evidence of such actions. Through videos, testimonies, and collaborative analysis, we share our experiences in a way that resonates more like a chorus than the voice of a soloist.

### **Improvisation Towards Liberation**

In *Altering a Fixed Identity: Thinking Through Improvisation*, Anne Douglas, through the work of Allan Kaprow, describes “the ‘open ended’ and ‘unforeseen’ [. . .] as qualities of improvisation,” (1) which, for Douglas, “may in some circumstances be thought of as a ‘keeping going’ in the face of the unforeseen and unexpected” (4). The unforeseen advancement of the COVID-19 pandemic has left communities, states, and global organizations with no script, yet connected by a common response: improvisation.

As a learning community, we have documented the improvised responses of higher education institutions and public schools in North and South America in the videos that follow. We also

learned how rural communities in Indonesia improvised differently than those in Western urban centers. The difference was proximity rather than distancing, togetherness rather than confinement, organic instead of virtual improvisation. As Naomi Klein writes, “[w]e do not always respond to shocks with regression. Sometimes, in the face of crisis, we grow up—fast” (462). We embraced this impulse to grow rather than regress by learning collectively and pushing ourselves to envision alternative systems while knowing that others are aggressively promoting a neoliberal capitalist agenda (Figures 1-2).

We observed cases where, for instance, children had to wait for their parents to return home so they could share one phone among two or three siblings to connect with their teacher; others were not so fortunate. In our previous publication, *Observing Different Worlds: Action Research and the Musical Learning Community*, we note that “in Ecuador’s largest city, Guayaquil, corpses laid unattended to decompose in the streets after the health and funerary systems collapsed” (Rubio Carrillo et al.). Families were destroyed by members faced with an impossible choice: work the streets at the risk of infection or stay home and risk hunger (Figure 3). How can humanity keep striving for liberation if our cities have transformed into places of imprisonment and isolation? One answer was music and the arts, which became ways to catalyze the imagination through improvisation (Video 1). When used in this way, imagination can be a resource outside the influence of neoliberal tactics that use isolation and alienation.

While studying prisoners’ and guards’ experiences, Nayanee Basu reflects that “artistic improvisation opens up doubt [. . .] in the social realm, challenging the instituted physical and emotional separation between prisoners and non-prisoners in quite practical, considered ways, altering but not dissolving the system” (1). Similarly, despite radical measures like mandatory confinement and strict curfews enforced by armed forces in Ecuador, liberation was made possible through connectivity. We transferred rural models of togetherness, learned from Indonesia, to keep our interactions alive as a space of freedom. We improvised an imaginary space away from oppression and inequalities without dissolving the systemic barriers emboldened by the pandemic.



Figures 1-2: University students protesting the Ecuadorian government’s choice to pay private debt and cut funding for public universities. Photos by Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Ecuador (FEUE). “Don’t pay your private debt with our public education” (Figure 1). “The virus is the government that kills with social injustice” (Figure 2).



Video 1: Music students across the Americas discussing how they used the arts and music during periods of confinement caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Click the image to view.



Figure 3: A peddler working in the south of Guayaquil, the most affected city in Ecuador during the pandemic. Photo by José Sánchez Lindao / AFP.



## Imagination: Creating Alternatives

Despite engaging in virtual interactions, students missed their peers. In their testimonies, both in elementary and higher education across the Americas, students emphasized how significant it was to connect physically (Video 2). Physical interactions gained new value in retrospect. In cities, it became a dream to encounter each other physically. But examples of physical contact persisted in some places: through one of our members, for instance, we learned that in rural communities on the island of Java, Indonesia, community development focused on the land, the crops, and the creation of art that engaged in intercultural encounters. Public performances were prioritized despite the realities imposed by the pandemic (Video 3). In those cases, physical encounters did not lose their place. And for us, listening to each other's processes as we shared our work helped us gain alternative perspectives about the pandemic.

Daniel Fischlin and Eric Porter, in their 2016 article, argue that “the particularities of improvisational practice emerge not simply from the ways we inhabit cities, but also from their physical characteristics—and then from *both* the culturally specific manifestations of built environments *and* their contingent exteriorities” (6). It became evident to us that our environments' structures provided the constraints and freedoms that were intrinsic to the rise of our cultural manifestations and their contingencies. For example, we observed how the collective models in Indonesia that were born under the strains of school closures improvised educational alternatives that were community-based and arts-centered. Cristina, our member who engaged in those processes, felt an increased commitment to the locale (Video 4). In much the same way, Stephen Lehman points out how Jackie McLean felt an increased commitment to his host city of Hartford, Connecticut, by having the liberty to impact its culture after founding the Artists Collective (6). Those are contingencies that emerge both from the way cities are inhabited and from their physical characteristics.



Video 2: Music students across the Americas discussing how they miss socializing physically with others. Click the image to view.



Video 3: Artistic performances in Java, Indonesia, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Click the image to view.



Video 4: Community arts and educational initiatives in Central Java, Indonesia, during school closure due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Click the image to view.

Rachel Elliot, in her 2008 article, notes that a suspension of habits may occur when we open ourselves to new perceptual events that start forming new habits (8-9). In our case, in rural Indonesia, we learned that immersive improvisations to transform the body's habits led us to new learnings while also recognizing how children express their artistic and improvisatory experiences (Video 5). Those learnings took place individually, then collectively, by transmitting those experiences to the rest of the Musical Learning Community. Some opportunities fostered an improvisatory relocation towards virtual spaces, evidencing, as Francesca Ferrando insists, that our species inhabits a posthuman era of hybridity between organism and machine—as she writes, “we are cyborgs” (26). The pandemic pushed this change of mind-habit further as we moved so many global practices towards virtual spaces. Such posthuman recognition, partly in the organic world and partly in the virtual world, is what led our members to create alternative virtual communities.



Video 5: Children improvising in Central Java, Indonesia, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Click the image to view.

### **The Poetics of Life: COVID-19, a Point of Departure**

In his work on Maracatu Rural, Stefan Weghuber notes that, in that tradition, “improvisation is a complex and contradictory concept with many ambiguous interpretations that are easily misunderstood [. . . a Maracatu] performer has three culturally acceptable options: to improvise freely; to chant internalized lines; or to combine these two elements” (4; paraphrasing Siba Veloso and Astier Basílio). This notion of improvisation, despite its basis in physical encounters, is also a model for how, in the context of our virtual community, improvisation has served as a point of departure. For instance, our Musical Learning Community's birth was first “free improvisation” and was later formalized. Further, our members, who are active teachers both in North and South America, have had to improvise their practice within the script provided by their districts and institutions. A combination of these two elements occurred when Cristina was

invited to perform in Central Java. The journey to the site, the performance itself, and the cultural activities after the performance had a dynamic relationship between free improvisation and internalized lines of action (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Local newspaper coverage for *Paja de Páramo*, an improvisatory performance by Cristina Duque (*Vidarte*), member of the Musical Learning Community.

Weghuber further discusses Bruno Nettl's argument that a critical aspect of understanding improvisatory processes "involves the identification of a point of departure [. . .] which the improviser uses as a basis for his or her art" (5). This view of improvisation relates intrinsically to our point of departure, the COVID-19 pandemic, and its impact on the *poetics of our lives*. It describes how new practices establish themselves after an improvisatory process. As every process necessarily begins with a point of departure, humanity improvises new forms of culture as we unfold the guiding actions of our contingent existences.

What we have seen through our video documentation and experiences are some responses to crises. Improvisation is dialogical; it is a back-and-forth between what transpires and what will come next. It is no surprise that while some people are searching and finding ways to help others to create community processes, the world is also still subsumed in protests, occupations, uprisings, and demonstrations that challenge neoliberalism. This polarity in responses is common where neoliberal authority takes place. Gigi Argyropoulou, in an article on cultural collisions, states that resistance can only be made through an alternative identity construction, one that deals with the present reality but focuses on an imagined future (1). Her analysis leads



to the notion that “[u]nderstanding the methods and failings of [. . .] struggles [across social strata] is essential to advancing new solutions” (1), especially where there is a conflict between neoliberal forces and bottom-up grassroots resistance. The Musical Learning Community is our modest proposal for a long-term vision that provides an alternative to neoliberal knowledge construction and social domination. We aim to share our methods—and failings—with other grassroots communities in order to work towards the construction of alternative identities and a shared imagined future.

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