Free Your Mind

Nov. 24, 2010

By Katherine Duke '05

More than a dozen student performers were crowded around me, making some very catchy music together. They were stomping and clapping in rhythm, making doo-wop sounds and singing lyrics in at least two different languages. But this wasn't an a cappella concert—at least, not a *planned* one. This was a lesson for students in the First-Year Seminar "Thinking Through Improvisation."

Dominic Poccia, the Rufus Tyler Lincoln Professor of Biology, and Andy Jaffe, then director of jazz studies at Amherst, co-founded the seminar in 1997 and co-taught it for several years (until Jaffe moved on to Williams College). The idea grew out of the professors' shared love of jazz, in which improvisation has always been a key element (Poccia plays baritone sax and clarinet and has frequent gigs on campus and throughout the Five College area). They wondered: What exactly is improvisation? How is it done well? At what times in life is it useful? Poccia points out the double meaning of the title "Thinking Through Improvisation": the seminar involves both *thinking about improvisation* and *practicing improvisation as a way of thinking*.

Onawumi Jean Moss, storyteller and former associate dean of students, with students in the First-Year Seminar "Thinking Through Improvisation"

Though most modern Americans associate improv primarily with comedy and musical performance, Jaffe and Poccia wanted to explore ways in which other cultures use it (cultures that have never developed written language, for example, must employ a great deal of improvisation in their storytelling traditions). They also recognized improvisation as marvelously multidisciplinary. Through the years, students in the seminar have written their final papers on everything from "Improvisation of College Sports Coaches" to "Improvisation in War" to "The Role of Improvisation in the Everyday Living of the Blind and Deaf Individual" to "Improvisation in Massage—It'll Rub You the Right Way." (In addition to a paper at the end of the semester, each student also does an ungraded improvisational performance in front of the class.) Guest improvisers invited to speak and perform for and with the students this semester have included pianist Joel Martin, professional clown Stephen Stearns, cook and caterer Phil Keenan and Professor Wendy Woodson of Amherst's theater and dance department. This year, Poccia has added to the syllabus some readings and discussion about the neurobiology of improv: What do MRI scans and other new technologies reveal about what happens in various parts of the brain when a person engages in improvisational thinking and behavior?

Eli Mlaver '14 told me he chose "Thinking Through Improvisation" from the list of First-Year Seminar options because the course description was "the most ridiculous thing I've ever read"; the seminar "sounded like it would lead to all sorts of different experiences" outside of his comfort zone. You don't go into college expecting to spend four years improvising, Mlaver said—you expect the opposite. Poccia

agrees that spontaneity and improvisational skills are too often overlooked and underemphasized at colleges, where so much of students' energy is dedicated to editing and revising their work and to laying out precise plans for the future. He notices that students come into his biology lab, or are scared away from the sciences altogether, with the assumption that science is relentlessly rigid and logical, when in fact it is rife with creativity and accidental discovery. Discovery—in the sciences, mathematics and the arts—is a major area of inquiry in the course. Poccia believes that "improvisational thinking is essential to a complete liberal arts education" and that it can and does help students in many areas of life beyond academia.

Poccia began the Nov. 11 class meeting by introducing Onawumi Jean Moss, an acclaimed storyteller and former associate dean of students at Amherst, who has made a guest appearance in the seminar for every semester that it's been taught. Moss took the floor and asked the students what the course had taught them about improvisational thinking so far.

"We've learned that we have to live in the moment," said one student.

"In order to improvise in a trade, one must learn the tools of that trade," said another. (Poccia told me later that he objects to the way many dictionaries define *improvisation* as the act of creating or performing "without previous preparation." In fact, he says, skilled improvisers draw from lots of advance knowledge and preparation; they carry out many different subroutines that have become automatic through months and years of practice.)

But, another student piped up, "you can't let your expertise limit you in terms of your creative possibilities."

"Basically, improvisation's all about setting your mind free from all the restrictions of society and restrictions of thought—not being threatened by judgment," said another student. "It is also based on what you know, to create something you don't know."

"Improvisational thinking is—ooh, it's so hot!" Moss said. "Oh, God, it's so good!"

She reminded the students not to be afraid of taking risks and "screwing up"—that "every mistake is pregnant with learning." The class talked about successful inventions that have arisen out of supposed mistakes (such as the not-very-sticky glue that's now used on Post-it notes). And then Moss began to weave a story—one that was both an improvisation in itself and a description of a previous real-life exercise in creativity: She spoke first of how the idea of a lap pool for swimming inspired her to add a big, beautiful kitchen to her home; then of the view from the windows of that kitchen; then of the flowers and birds in the mural that adorns the walls; then of the guests she's welcomed into that kitchen; and finally of the way she exercises by walking around the kitchen each day.

Next, Moss had the students stand up and begin walking all around Room 7 of the Arms Music

Building, touching things and quietly observing the features of the room. I was amazed at how many details I suddenly saw everywhere: the different colors of the chairs, the bits of chalk on the chalkboard tray, the patterns of the ceiling tiles. How had I not noticed the rainbow umbrella that someone had left open on the floor? There was an entire world of potential inspirations in this room. Soon, Moss instructed us to make eye contact with one another as we moved around and to begin making sounds with our voices and bodies. Then she guided us into sharing and synchronizing our sounds, raising our voices and gathering closer and closer together—until everything culminated in the vibrant a cappella performance around me.

After a minute or two, Moss called the music to an end. "What just happened?" she asked.

A student gasped, "We just had a jam session!"

Tags: Dick Poccia Moss Thinking Through Improvisation dominic poccia first-year seminar improv improvisation onawumi jean moss poccia