“IMPROVISATIONAL WORKSHOPS FOR BUSINESSES: UNDERSTANDING HOW PARTICIPANTS MAKE SENSE OF IMPROVISATION”

by

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B.A., Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, 2011

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Communication

2013
This thesis entitled:

"Improvisational Workshops for Businesses: Understanding How Participants Make Sense of Improvisation"

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol #: 12-0584
Brooks, Laurel Alana (M.A., Communication)

"Improvisational Workshops for Businesses: Understanding How Participants Make Sense of Improvisation"

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Matt Koschmann

This MA thesis is a grounded, inductive, and qualitative study on improvisational workshops for businesses. It poses questions as to how improvisational workshops are different from other forms of experiential learning and team building activities. In addition, it looks at how improvisation versus improvisational workshops is framed in the literature. Due to the discrepancies in how improvisation and improvisational workshops are discussed, I investigate how participants make sense of improvisational workshops. In order to explore these questions, I observed an improvisational workshop at a local theater company and conducted subsequent interviews with participants. This study found that while the manager’s attended the same workshop, their responses were fairly inconsistent with one another and at times inconsistent with the literature and the facilitator of the workshop. Therefore, I utilize the lens of sensemaking and the notion of how plausibility is favored over accuracy to explore participants’ plausible responses; and how the improvisational workshop “worked” due to the distributed nature of this community of branch managers and their multiple meanings of improvisation.

Keywords: Improvisation, improvisational workshops, experiential learning, team building, sensemaking, plausibility.
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Groups are an essential aspect of organizations because groups are how most work is accomplished (Greenbaum & Query, 1999). Accordingly, managers have long been looking for ways to enhance group communication (see Frey, 2002). Two of the methods that are often tried are experiential learning (Meyer, 2003) and team building (Williams, Graham, & Baker, 2002) workshops or training sessions (Glaser, 1994). Experiential learning is simply learning through direct experience (Kolb, 1984). Some examples of experiential learning activities are outdoor-adventure training and workshops (Meyer, 2003). And team building sessions are essentially organized activities that attempt to generate team ‘synergy’ in order to lead to more effective teamwork (Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982). Through these experiential learning and/or team building activities, managers hope to ignite and sustain important elements that encompass group communication (Glaser, 1994); including, listening skills, problem solving, leadership skills, and trust (Gremler, Hoffman, Keaveney, & Wright, 2000; Williams et al., 2002). These workshops are group communication phenomena because they center on assessing and enhancing the group or team’s communication (Daniels, 1999; Meyer, 2003) in order to aid in producing a more effective team. These experiential learning workshops—often held offsite—have been studied by scholars; additionally, investigation into their content and affects, especially the organizational development strategy of team building, is fairly well-known and established in the literature (see De Meuse & Liebowitz, 1981; Klein et al., 2009; Liebowitz & De Meuse, 1982; Salas, Rozell, Mullen, & Driskell, 1999 for reviews).
A fairly new form of experiential learning and team building has come on to the market called improvisational workshops and is gaining popularity (Corsun, Young, McManus, & Erdem, 2006). Within these workshops, there are attempts to introduce and practice improvisation and the variety of skills that go along with it to a specific group or team. Before these workshops, managers specify to an improvisational facilitator what they would like to work on and then they and their employees attend a workshop where they participate in various improvisational activities. These workshops are based around the notion of improvisational performance and involve spontaneous and intuitive action that has no script or planning of any sort (Crossan, 1998). Improvisational performance, through both jazz and theater, is written as an art form that encompasses strong senses of intuition (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997), creativity (Montuori, 2003), paradox (Vera & Crossan, 2007), and fluidity (Eisenberg, 1990). It is written as a holistic and dynamic process that needs to be practiced constantly (Berliner, 1994).

Through these games and activities, the many benefits that improvisational workshops claim to offer are similar in form to the experiential learning sessions mentioned above; they are primarily group communication phenomena and focus on enhancing listening skills, team building, trust, etc. (Huffaker & West, 2005). However, improvisational facilitators claim to provide something else that these other workshops cannot offer. This is through producing learning scenarios where group members can begin to experiment and adopt improvisational ways of interacting that apply to their work (Gagnon, Vough, & Nickerson, 2012; Vera & Crossan, 2005). More specifically, participants may begin to take steps towards implementing ‘organizational improvisation’ as defined by McKnight and Bontis (2002) “the ability to spontaneously recombine knowledge, processes and structure in real time, resulting in creative problem solving that is grounded in the realities of the moment” (p.219).
So, rather than merely being a new twist on already known forms of experiential learning and team building, most improvisation advocates believe that organizational improvisation provides a vital and distinct component to the organizing process. In other words, along with more structured ways of planning and organizing, organizational improvisation is a necessary piece in order for organizations to survive and adapt to the ever changing corporate environment. Organizational improvisation is in many ways challenging more structured ways of organizing (Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999; Vera & Crossan, 2004). In addition, organizational improvisation is also written as a fluid, intuitive, and paradoxical phenomenon in the literature (i.e. Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997; Montuori, 2003). Thus, improvisation advocates believe it is fundamentally different from what you may get out of any other team building workshop that managers can choose to invest their money in.

However, the rise and popularity of these workshops raises some questions. Firstly, are these workshops truly any different from other experiential learning or team building workshops? They share many similarities in terms of beneficial ‘outcomes’ (i.e. trust, team building, etc.); but do they somehow standout from the pack with a focus on learning improvisation in order to improvise more effectively at work? Additionally, given the artistic and holistic nature of improvisation, can it really be taught in the confines of a workshop? Can the artistic and holistic aspects of improvisation actually be transferred to a business workshop format and packaged as a commercial product? Or perhaps, does this somehow go against the nature of improvisation? In any case, does the holistic, paradoxical, and intuitive nature of improvisation transfer over to improvisational workshops?

In addition, are there complications and compromises involved in bringing the art form of improvisation to market? Certainly other art forms, such as theater (Kramer, 2004) and
symphony orchestras (Ruud, 2000) have faced difficulties in incorporating the demands of a business enterprise. Is this a similar issue in improvisational workshops? For example, established improvisational groups have had to separate their business or consulting operations from their artistic ventures (Second City website, 2013), which suggests that there may be complications in maintaining the integrity of the art form when trying to develop a commercial product like a workshop.

While the literature on improvisation in organizations is growing, the literature on improvisational workshops is fairly limited. And the literature that does exist on improvisational workshops is fairly narrow. In other words, this literature focuses on descriptive, outcome-based, and quantitative studies that empirically measure or describe the effects of improvisational workshops; essentially treating these workshops as a monolithic entity without appreciating the more nuanced and complexities of this art form (i.e. Hoffman, 2012; Mendonca & Fiedrich, 2006). This is problematic because improvisation is process-oriented (Vera & Crossan, 2004) and by no means outcome-driven (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Quite the opposite, outcomes are completely unpredictable and subjective in improvisational processes. Overall, the processes of improvisational performance, organizational improvisation, and improvisational workshops are not synonymous and should not be treated as such. Therefore, given the popularity of improvisational workshops (Corsun et al., 2006) and the narrow and inadequate research on these workshops (Vera & Crossan, 2005), in addition to the complications that art forms may face when put onto market, we need an in-depth and nuanced understanding of these workshops that focuses on how people make sense of improvisational workshops. This will give us better insight into what improvisational workshops might be, how people make sense of them, and what their value is to organizations.
Furthermore, focusing on how people make sense of improvisational workshops through the theory of sensemaking is a worthwhile perspective for several reasons. Firstly, sensemaking deals with how people make sense of new or unknown situations (Weick, 1995). Thus, studying a group of individuals that have never attended an improvisational workshop before would be a fitting query for sensemaking. This is the case because an improvisational workshop would be new and unknown to the group; and examining how they make sense of this new and unknown event would be valuable to develop further insights on improvisational workshops and their potential value to participants and organizations. Secondly, the issues described above on the discrepant literature between improvisational workshops and improvisation as a concept, in addition to the complications of art being packaged for selling; seems to address the need for more research on understanding improvisational workshops and their potential value to organizations. Thirdly, given these discrepancies in perspectives on improvisation, it is important to learn how people experience and understand improvisation differently. While I understand that different meanings of improvisation may be expected, more importantly, these differences may shed light on what participants think “it” is and how they believe improvisation may be beneficial to how they work. Sensemaking provides a valuable framework in order to further understand multiple meanings in groups.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the phenomenon of improvisational workshops in order to develop a better understanding of how people make sense of these workshops and their potential value to participants and organizations. To accomplish this I will first review the literature on experiential learning and team building in order to situate improvisational workshops as a specific type of experiential learning and team building activity and glean what may set them apart. Then I will explore the concept of improvisation as it has
been developed in the organizational studies literature; mostly through jazz and theater. From here, I will look at the limited literature on improvisational workshops and compare how improvisational workshops are written about versus how improvisation is developed as a concept in organizations. This comparison surfaces relevant questions about the meaning of improvisation and how people make sense of it in workshops. Accordingly, I turn to the literature on sensemaking to provide a theoretical framework to understand the ways in which people make sense of improvisation in improvisational workshops and the implications of the sensemaking process for the practice of improvisation. This turn to sensemaking helps me articulate the Weick’s (1995) notion of plausibility as a framework for understanding improvisational workshops and their value for organizations.

This study is grounded and inductive in nature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Consequently, these issues arose out of the research site and data. Therefore, these questions will be addressed through data I have collected at a workshop at The Metropolitan Theater, a local improvisational theater in addition to subsequent interviews of workshop participants. This workshop was attended by credit union branch managers who had never attended an improvisational workshop before. The findings of this project reveal a number of inconsistent responses from managers; with each other, the literature, and the facilitator of the workshop. These responses centered on how the participants made sense of the workshop and what value improvisation had on their own work. I then discuss these findings through the perspective of sensemaking theory; in particular the notion of plausibility being favored over accuracy, which helps to explain these responses. By ‘plausible’ responses, I mean that participants connected and related their meaning of improvisation to their own work. Furthermore, I enhance this notion of plausibility within the context of a “distributed community”; an extension of the concept of loosely coupled systems...
(Weick, 1976). This leads me to explain that improvisational workshops “work” due to the distributed community of the group and how their plausible meanings of improvisation were allowed to co-exist.

This study makes several important contributions. Firstly, it sheds further light onto improvisational workshops and how participants make sense of them in order to understand what their value is to participants and the workplace. Secondly, through the notion of plausibility in sensemaking, it empirically adds to the literature on how plausible stories are more important than accurate perceptions and discusses an example of this occurring as a result from an improvisational workshop. In addition, it introduces the term “distributed community”—an extension of loosely coupled systems—and how this community makes sense of a new or unknown situation; in this case the improvisational workshops. I present this notion of distributed communities as an extension of Weick’s (1976) notion of loosely couple systems; which represent separate though similar organizational elements and interdependent working parts (Orton & Weick, 1990). Distributed communities are becoming more prevalent in today’s workplace (Hinds, 2002) therefore this study adds and calls for research focusing on how these groups make sense. Also, the responses that were inconsistent with each other and the literature displays to both facilitators and researchers the different ways that improvisation is made sense of by participants; while the responses may be inaccurate with the literature or the workshop facilitator, they still claim that these meanings relate to how they work. Carrying this knowledge may help in facilitating workshops that directly relate to each participant’s own work. Though first, I will explore the literature on experiential learning and team building.
Experiential Learning & Team Building

Experiential learning and team building sessions are instances of group communication phenomena. Group communication focuses on examining how groups organize and operate through communication (Frey, 2002). Likewise, these experiential learning and team building sessions focus on producing effective teams through enhancing communication (Glaser, 1994). The importance of group communication is well established in the literature (see Frey, 2002) and more practically, these groups provide a fundamental unit of analysis to study organizations (Poole, 1998). In addition, ‘healthy’ groups are necessary for organizations to survive as they help to foster creativity and innovation (Salazar, 2002). In order to achieve a ‘healthy’ team or group, managers are turning to experiential learning and team building sessions to foster group relations and skills including listening, trust, problem solving, and leadership skills (Gremler et al., 2000). Therefore, experiential learning or team building workshops and training sessions are a key way that managers hope to improve group communication and team performance. Accordingly, improvisational workshops are a new and alternative type of workshop that offers experiential learning and team building (Daly, Grove, Dorsch, & Fisk, 2009).

These various workshops and training sessions that aid in group communication happen to fall under the large umbrella of what Kolb (1984) deems as experiential learning. This popular adult learning theory (Clements et al., 1995) is simply the idea of learning through experience or learning by doing (Kolb, 1984). Some of the popular forms of workshops that are categorized under experiential learning are outdoor-adventure training exercises (Meyer, 2003) and
wilderness activities (Vowles, 1994), as well as improvisational workshops (Daly et al., 2009). Additionally, one of the most popular forms of organizational development is usually addressed during these workshops: team building. Team building is essentially organized activities that address a team’s structure, values, and interpersonal dynamics in order for their ‘synergy’ and skills to increase and therefore help to lead to effective teamwork (Hardy & Crace, 1997). Team building activities have been a resource for managers for decades now (Liebowitz & De Meuse, 1982) and scholars have been constantly attempting to analyze the effects of these sessions to see whether or not they directly impact team performance (Klein et al., 2009; Salas et al., 1999). As mentioned above, improvisational workshops are a new manifestation of experiential learning workshops that may focus on team building (Daly et al., 2009). In order to situate improvisational workshops within this literature, I will review the literature on experiential learning and team building in this section.

**Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning activities or workshops focus on ‘soft skills’ (Clements et al., 1995) that are related to the workplace, but not necessarily specific to the workplace. In other words, many of these activities rely on metaphor to translate abstract skills back to the workplace (Meyer, 2003). These include skills such as instigating trust, listening and problem solving skills, etc. (Gremler et al., 2000). Experiential learning was first developed by Kolb (1984) and focuses on the main idea that learning can occur via experience. More specifically, that it is more beneficial than passive observational experience (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning consists of a four step cycle. This cycle includes (1) participants having a concrete experience, (2) the experience is then observed and reflected upon; (3) the experience is abstracted and generalized, and (4) these generalizations are tested in new situations that then lead to a new concrete
experience. These qualifications that constitute experiential learning are what various training classes that take place outside of work may fall under. For example, outdoor training or activities and improvisational workshops would fall under these categories. Accordingly, Vera and Crossan (2007) write that improvisation is a “learning by doing” process.

Some of the most popular forms of experiential learning are wilderness training sessions and outdoor-adventure training sessions (Manzay et al., 1995). Wilderness training sessions usually require participants to actively engage in activities such as white water rafting, mountain climbing, and sailing and usually focus on individual skills (Wagner et al., 1991) and may require participants to spend a few days camping or a few days away from home (Vowles, 1994). Outdoor adventure training sessions, however, are less intensive. They usually last a few hours and may occur over a few separate meeting periods (Vowles, 1994). In general, they involve activities based in an outdoor setting that incorporate different physical or mental exercises (Wagner et al., 1991). These exercises may look like ropes courses, (Daniels, 1999), trust falls, obstacle courses, and various other physical team-oriented activities (Vowles, 1994). Following the teams’ completion of the exercise, facilitators encourage reflection on the lessons from the activities and then help to start the process of transferring those given lessons to the workplace through a ‘debriefing’ stage (Meyer, 2003; Wagner et al., 1991). These lessons are usually skills like building trust, problem-solving skills (Manzay et al., 1995), enhancing self-awareness, team building, changing attitudes (Meyer, 2003), leadership, innovative thinking (Vowles, 1994), risk-taking, and interpersonal communication skills (Clements et al., 1995).

Outdoor adventure training sessions have been both praised and critiqued in management literature. For example, these outdoor training sessions have been claimed to ‘close the gap’ between abstract thinking and application and promote holistic learning (Meyer, 2003).
Additionally, skills and outcomes that claim to come out of these workshops include emergent shared meanings, cooperation, high engagement levels, dealing with risk (Meyer, 2003) taking participants out of their comfort zone, and breaking out of old patterns of thinking (Clements et al., 1995). Also, studies have shown that in some cases, these activities can shed light on various issues a team or organization may be having that has not been directly discussed and is causing underlying tension. For example, Daniels (1999) in his case study found that through these outdoor activities and the subsequent ‘debriefing’ or discussion sessions directly following, the organization’s parking lot policy emerged as a source of dissatisfaction among workers. On the last day of the training sessions, participants collectively worked on creating a new parking lot policy that would settle some of the long standing issues they were encountering.

While positive outcomes have been associated with these outdoor trainings, these sessions have also been critiqued. They have been criticized to be potentially physically and mentally harmful, a large legal liability (Clements et al., 1995), and discriminatory to organizational members that may not be able to participate in such physical activities (Clements et al., 1995; Wagner et al., 1991). Also, as mentioned above, these sessions usually rely on metaphor to transfer the learned skills to the workplace. For instance, ‘the wall’ is a popular activity in these sessions. ‘The wall’ is a thirteen foot wall that the group has to scale over by working together to get each member over safely. There are no ladders or grips; the only resource they have is each other. According to Daniels (1999) this activity also represents the ‘walls’ that employees face every day in the workplace. Accordingly, some scholars have argued that this transfer that employees must enable and sustain might be easier said than done (Meyer, 2003). The transfer is therefore reliant on a talented facilitator, multiple sessions, and a well-designed ‘post-activity’ phase where participants discuss and reflect on their learning
experiences (McEvoy et al., 1997; Meyer, 2003). According to Meyer (2003), one of the most difficult obstacles to surpass with outdoor training sessions is avoiding the ‘fun-in-the-sun’ attitude where participants enjoy themselves, but nothing more. In light of the potential benefits, businesses have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on this training (Williams et al., 2002) and it proves to be fairly time consuming, (Meyer, 2003) so an appropriate concern for some is whether or not it is worth it. In a similar vein, team building activities and workshop sessions have fallen under similar circumstances in both praise and critique. In the following section, I will discuss what exactly team building is, its praises and critiques, and finally the relationship between these team building activities and improvisation.

Team Building

Team building has been described as the most popular form of organizational development (Buller, 1986; Salas et al., 1999) and since the 1990’s has continued to grow in popularity (Klein et al., 2009). This has been attributed to the possible fact that its emphasis and popularity is due to a “natural evolution of management and organizational theory” (Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982, p. 2). According to Klein et al. (2009), team building was originally designed as an intervention tactic for groups that focused only on developing interpersonal communication skills and relations. It then evolved to sometimes address achieving goals and producing specific results. Team building is described as activities that utilize experiential learning that address a team’s structures, values, and interpersonal dynamics to generally increase their skills to lead to effective teamwork (Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982). As such, it has been described as an investment in the ‘people resource’ of an organization (Manzay et al., 1995).
There are a variety of claims in both team building exercises and the business and management literature for what managers or groups can get out of team building. Daniels (1999) writes that these include activities that revolve around “(1) clarifying employee roles, (2) reducing conflict, (3) improving interpersonal relations between group members, and (4) improving problem solving skills” (p. 238). Essentially, the main point of team building is to increase the effectiveness of teams (Buller, 1986). Or another way to put it, team building activities enhance team synergy and thus have a direct relation to team productivity (Hardy & Crace, 1997). These processes may be formal or informal strategies that focus directly on the team and their relational dynamics (Klein et al., 2009). Scholars argue that team building is needed and essential when there is some sort of blockage in performance (Hardy & Crace, 1997). In an article on team building foundations, Hardy and Crace (1997) write that “team building is needed when some or all of the following symptoms are present” (p. 5): these symptoms include: interpersonal conflicts, inappropriate use of resources, low productivity, role ambiguity, unclear discussions, lack of creativity or interest, and complaints that the team does not respond to individual needs or does not meet its responsibilities (p. 5).

In order to begin to ‘cure’ these symptoms of ill team performance, scholars have attempted to further address team building activities by what they accomplish. According to Beer (1976), there are four models or types of team building that are based, in turn, on the primary issues they address. These are (1) the goal setting model, which focuses on a group’s goal orientation; (2) the interpersonal model, which deals with developing well-functioning relation skills such as trust and mutual support; (3) the role model, which attempts to create clear perspectives on what each person’s role is in the group and the subsequent interaction between the group members; and (4) the managerial grid model which pits an ideal situation that is
created by the group against the ‘real’ situation at hand. While these groups seem to neatly categorize different aspects of team building exercises, Beer (1976) argues that team building sessions hardly ever rely on one model alone.

Some of the literature argues then that by implementing and participating in team building activities, any group can communicate better to become a high-performing team (Shandler & Egan, 1996). Additionally, studies have found that team building exercises increase productivity, decrease-turnover, improve employee satisfaction and the organizational climate, and all in all increase-team effectiveness (Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982). Also, Woodcock and Francis (1981) write that team building exercises have advantages ranging from deriving tangible benefits to enhancing team and individual effectiveness as well as individual members realizing that they are both relevant and appreciated in the team or organization (p. 3). However, these lists of benefits and the studies they come from have been criticized in various ways from other scholars.

The criticisms of team building come in the form of both the studies that examine the activities as well as the activities themselves. The team building community including participants and scholars are even a bit unsure how and why team building works (Klein et al., 2009). Scholars have found that in general the link between team building activities and team effectiveness in the workplace is by and large equivocal at best (Klein et al., 2009); the conclusions of various studies show very mixed and unclear results. Additionally, the enthusiasm of practitioners is not matched with sufficient and viable empirical data (Salas et al., 1999). In other words, the lists of benefits of team effectiveness and performance described above have been called by Salas et al. (1999) enthusiastic descriptions but not backed up by sufficient evidence. This is in part blamed on the methodological issues found in team building studies.
Early studies and reviews of the literature on team building found that there were study design and measurement flaws within team building research (Klein et al., 2009). Due to the methodological flaws in many team building studies, Buller (1986) made a specific call for the refinement of methodology in such studies. However, even a few decades later, the call still remains (Salas et al., 1999; Klein et al., 2009). Contrary to what was believed prior, upon a thorough investigation into the literature and a conducted meta-analytic integration, Salas et al. (1999) found that “overall, there was no significant effect of team building on performance” (p. 309). However, a subsequent study by Klein et al. (2009) found through a revised and updated version of the previous study that team building is in fact beneficial to team functioning, though as they write, “not all teams will benefit from the same team building intervention” (p. 215); thus each team and their needs are slightly different and therefore require different team building ‘solutions’.

There is also critique of the team building activities themselves. While they may provide a long list of benefits, negative outcomes may arise also. Interpersonally, these activities may surface unresolved conflicts and may raise anxiety and tension between members (Hardy & Crace, 1997). Liebowitz and De Muese (1982) write that groups may suffer from groupthink after strong team building sessions. And in general, the process is both expensive and time consuming (Klein et al., 2009; Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982). Additionally, team building exercises are also prone to fall into the ‘fun-in-the-sun’ trap that was discussed earlier in experiential learning exercises (Meyer, 2003). However, some still believe that the benefits greatly outweigh the risk (Hardy & Crace, 1997); which may explain why these workshops and sessions have become so popular. The outdoor-adventure training sessions as well as the wilderness expeditions that were discussed earlier usually aim for team building as a goal or
outcome; in fact, it is the most sought after skill by managers during the planning and implementation of these activities (Daniels, 1999; Vowles, 1994).

The outdoor adventure and wilderness training sessions, among others, are activities that usually produce team building as an outcome. They could also be games, exercises, activities, etc. and take place in the wilderness (Vowles, 1994), the kitchen (Klein et al., 2009), or onstage (Berk & Trieber, 2009). But, the general processes remain the same. Essentially, there is a diagnosis of a particular set of issues the team has through data collection conducted by the facilitator, there is feedback and discussion with the manager or leader of the team about what the team building exercises will focus on, the session occurs, and may be followed by follow-up sessions (Liebowitz & De Muese, 1982). During these sessions, various discussions or activities may be facilitated and following, a ‘debriefing’ session is used to reflect and reinforce skills that were utilized during the subsequent activity (Manzay et al., 1995; Wagner et al., 1991).

Within the context of experiential learning and team building, a new form of workshop has grown in popularity: improvisational workshops (Corsun et al., 2006; Daly et al., 2009). Improvisational workshops are based on the performative art form called improvisation and offer an alternative approach to initiate team building. However, these workshops also challenge some of the conventional wisdom on team building and experiential learning by offering another benefit; attempting to instigate improvisational ways of organizing in the workplace. Before getting into the specific literature on improvisational workshops; it is important to first understand the larger concept and art form of improvisation and how it has been developed in the organizational studies literature.
Improvisation

The concept of improvisation is rooted in performance; both in theater (Johnstone, 1979; Spolin, 1963) and jazz music (Berliner, 1994). However, improvisational performance has a long history that began in 16th century Europe and then started musically through improvisational jazz music in New Orleans. Following this, improvisational theater and comedy was revived a few decades ago by Viola Spolin (1963) and Keith Johnstone (1979). Most of these instances of improvisation share similar qualities such as adaptability, intuition, and teamwork (McKnight & Bontis, 2002). In this section, I will further discuss this history and also discuss improvisation as an art form via performance, and finally, how literature on organizational improvisation came onto the scene.

Jazz music originated in the mid 1890’s in New Orleans (McKnight & Bontis, 2002) and is distinguished from other forms of music due to its improvisational use of structure (Hatch, 1999). While jazz music to some may appear to be unstructured, undeveloped, and fairly random, the amount of skill and practice that goes into playing jazz music is plenty (Berliner, 1994). Musicians collaboratively work together to produce innovative and novel versions of classic jazz tunes (Berliner, 1994). This is done in a few ways including connecting with other musicians on an intuitive level (Weick, 1998), embracing mistakes as a source of new routes to a better measure or song (Barrett, 1998), and simultaneously listening and playing (Berliner, 1994), among others. Thus, structure becomes embodied through improvisation and the various elements that happen to collect at the given place and time.

Historically, theatrical improvisation has been traced back to 16th century Italy in a form called commedia dell’arte (McKnight & Bontis, 2002). Here, the actors had no script and the
characters onstage were developed through interactions between the audience and the actors (Vera & Crossan, 2004). This occurred on European stages for 300 years or so and then somewhat disappeared. Theatrically, improvisation was essentially revived by Viola Spolin (1963) and Keith Johnstone (1979) through improvisational theater games that then led to the development of various improvisational troupes, including Chicago’s renowned improv group, Second City (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Thus, the history of improvisation shows how it can be called an art form; demonstrated through both theater performance and musical performance. Scholars explicitly claim improvisation to be an art form (Corsun et al. 2006; Crossan et al., 1996; Crossan, 1998). This art form is written about as a very holistic practice; through characteristics such as being a collaborative (Vera & Crossan, 2005), fluid (Eisenberg, 1990), creative (Montuori, 2003), intuitive (Weick, 1998), and paradoxical (Zheng, Venter, & Cornford, 2011) process that takes place onstage. Many of the improvisational tenets or ‘rules’ involve intuitively reacting in real-time (Larson, 2011), always thinking of your partner (Gagnon et al., 2012), and always saying “yes and…”(McKnight & Bontis, 2002) in order to produce an unpredictable product that was accomplished equally by the group as a whole as opposed to just one individual (Vera & Crossan, 2005). All of these characteristics make up the holistic process of improvisation as a concept. And it is important to note that it is not a procedure-driven process (i.e. follow step one, then step two, and so on). Instead, improvisation is practiced as a dynamic skill that can be refined with a lot of practice, but never ‘mastered’ (Berliner, 1994; Crossan et al., 1996). It is an art form that cannot truly be broken down into mechanical steps. For example, Spolin (1986) writes that the intuition required in improvisation “bypasses the intellect, the mind, the memory, the known. Using intuition cannot be taught. One must be tripped into it” (p. 4).
To further explain some of these characteristics, I’ll begin with what is sometimes called the “golden rule of improv” (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Crossan, 1998). “Yes and…” is the idea that if your partner suggests something, that suggestion becomes a reality or context for your scene; you must accept this reality with a “yes” and follow it up by building on that reality with an “and…” Essentially, it is a rule that requires actors to build on other’s contributions instead of blocking them (McKnight & Bontis, 2002). The principle of “yes and…” is one of acceptance no matter what. The “yes and…” rule provides some insight into another characteristic of improvisation: the limited amount of guidelines or structure that improvisation thrives off of. It also illustrates the importance and necessity of this rule (for example, in theatrical improvisation, if the partner were to say ‘no’, the scene ends because the reality is shattered). And as Vera and Crossan (2004) write, it is a fitting technique for actors to “focus on in-the-moment process of creation rather than on forcing a desired result” (pg. 738).

However, McKnight and Bontis (2002) write that this skill requires much training; it is not necessarily a natural reaction most times yet requires a strong sense of intuition. Though, Hoffman (2012) in his quantitative and output-orientated case study found that the rule of “yes and…” was one of the largest takeaways from the participants in his workshop. Therefore, “yes and…” is a fundamental piece to improvisational theater that may provide an important ‘takeaway’ from workshops. Another important characteristic of improvisation is paradox (Montuori, 2003; Zheng, Venter, & Cornford, 2011). For instance, Montuori (2003) writes that improvisation is made up of phenomenological properties that constitute a “dance between two extremes” (p. 249). Improvisational artists immerse themselves in practicing and refining a difficult skill only to “let go” when performing (Vera & Crossan, 2004); another paradox more specific to organizations is attempting to ‘plan not to plan’ (Baskerville, 2006).
By looking at the distinctive characteristics of improvisational performance, scholars from a variety of disciplines began to attempt to tie these artistic performance aspects to other realms of study. Research on improvisation in general ended up spreading across many academic disciplines including psychology (Zimbardo, 1965), theater (Wirth & Wirth, 1994), music (Nettl & Russell, 1998; Koutsoupidou & Hargreaves, 2009), education (Ford, 1995), and business and management (Vera & Crossan, 2004); most of these academic areas gleaning what they can from jazz improvisation.

Within organizational studies, the literature on improvisation gained much popularity in the 1990’s (Vendelo, 2009). It was first tied to organizations through jazz music as a suitable metaphor for organizing. Through this, the notion of organizational improvisation was born and has been claimed by scholars to be vital to organizations (Leybourne, 2010; Vera & Crossan, 2004). The ability for organizations to adapt and react efficiently to changing environments is becoming more pressing in modern day businesses (Dyba, 2000). Therefore, to speak more on improvisation in organizational studies, I will further discuss the appearance of improvisation in this literature beginning with jazz and then theater, and then more on organizational improvisation in general.

*Improvisation and Organizational Studies*

Within organizational studies, Bastien and Hostager (1988 & 1992) were two of the first to attempt to tie jazz and organizational studies together. In their 1988 study, they connected improvisational jazz and organizations and argued that they both share similar goals and characteristics. These included their similar social structures and the need for innovation in order to progress. In their 1992 study, they recorded and analyzed a ‘zero-history’ jazz band and then asked the musicians to actively watch and recall what decisions they made in the moment and
why. In these studies, the authors called the jazz metaphor within organizations a fruitful one to explore and other scholars began to adopt the concept. The jazz metaphor is an attempt from scholars to connect these two seemingly distinct worlds together, usually to describe a new metaphor for organizational structure or design (Hatch, 1999). This is done usually through examining the tenets of jazz improvisation (elements such as creating ‘groove’ through synergy, listening, etc.) and proposing that the metaphor can possibly change the way we organize (Barrett, 1998; Hatch, 1999). However, some scholars question the usefulness of the jazz metaphor (Cunha & Cunha, 2002; McKnight & Bontis, 2002; Vendelo, 2009; Weick, 1998).

Some scholars are beginning to reject the idea of the jazz metaphor; arguing that improvisation can provide much more than just a vehicle for description. In fact, Weick (1998) writes that jazz improvisation and organizations are two different beasts and may actually not work so well together simply due to their different settings. Other scholars have argued that the jazz metaphor is a dangerous base to build theories off of (Cunha & Cunha, 2002; Vendelo, 2009); that it goes beyond metaphor (McKnight & Bontis, 2002) through a distinct set of skills that can be directly applied to organizations (Crossan et al., 1996; Crossan, 1998). As a response to the insufficient model that the jazz metaphor provides, only a few scholars have argued that theatrical improvisation provides a better foundation to understand improvisation in organizations because of its accessibility and universality. Vera and Crossan (2004) write that “the elements upon which actors improvise are the same ones available to individuals in their day-to-day lives” (p. 728). Theatrical improvisation is better acclimated to relate to organizational members as opposed to having to rely on the musical knowledge and jargon that is required in order to fully grasp jazz improvisation.
However, even though theorists have attempted to tie improvisational performance and art to the workplace through both jazz and theater; the body of literature on organizational improvisation has been criticized from not having coherent definitions (Cunha et al., 1999). Cunha et al. (1999) even claimed that at some point, it seemed like scholars were utilizing definitions of organizational improvisation that only suited their own needs. And these definitions end up being very descriptive because they rely so much on transferring via metaphor from improvisational performance (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Therefore, in attempt to begin to tie together the body of literature on organizational improvisation at the time, Cunha et al. (1999) wrote a comprehensive review of the literature. The authors wrote that the literature on improvisation and organizations came in two waves or generations. The first generation was about the phenomenon of improvisation within the arts; especially jazz (i.e. Bastien & Hostager, 1992). The second generation subsequently drew on “anecdotal and empirical evidence from the business arena to study this phenomenon directly” (p. 300) (i.e. Orlikowski, 1996). Here, scholars did not rely as much on jazz as a metaphor for organizing, but still referred to it. Though, while there has not been an agreed upon definition of what organizational improvisation entails, organizational improvisation has been recognized as an important concept for organizations to adopt (Dyba, 2000; Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005) as well as a popular realm of research and study (Cunha et al., 1999). Therefore, the rise of improvisation in organizational studies has led improvisational workshops to attempt to impart the ideas of improvisation into the workplace. I will now review the research on these workshops and show how this literature raises questions about how improvisation is being conceptualized.
Improvisational Workshops

Improvisational workshops are rising in popularity and there is a small amount of studies to address them. In these studies, scholars usually argue that improvisational workshops provide a space for business professionals to begin to learn and practice improvisational skills (Crossan et al., 1996; Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Improvisational skills though are not only tricky to become ‘proficient’ in but also do not come naturally most times (McKnight & Bontis, 2002). Practicing improvisational skills is something that even renowned and popular improvisational artists constantly do. As Weick (1998) writes, the word improvisation is rooted in the word “provisio” which means doing something that is premeditated or in advanced; by placing the prefix of “im” in front of the word, “improvisio” thus means the opposite of provisio. Therefore, improvisation deals with the unanticipated and the unexpected; though improvisation is more than just spontaneity. For example, improvisational artists, both jazz and theater alike, would hardly call themselves ‘experts’ at improvisation; they are always practicing and always improving, it is a process (Crossan et al., 1996; Weick, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Berliner (1994) in his comprehensive ethnographic study on jazz improvisation wrote that jazz musicians are described more accurately as disciplined ‘practicers’ than practitioners. So, even disciplined improvisational artists are constantly practicing and refining their skills. And the literature on improvisational workshops claims that through these workshops, organizational members can begin to learn and refine their skills as well.

Improvisational workshops are advertised as a way for organizational members to learn and practice improvisational skills in a setting usually outside of the workplace. Improvisational facilitators work with managers in deciding what they would like to get out of the workshops. There may be more than one session that facilitators lead with the same group in order to work
on more skills or solidify a possible outcome (i.e. an organizational project in need of creativity or innovation); but in all cases, group communication is the general focus. In these workshops, they participate in various improvisational activities and games. A couple examples of activities include “Once Upon a Time” and “Strangely Speaking”. “Once Upon a Time” is where participants have to work together to create a story; but, the individual storyteller constantly changes depending on whom the ‘narrator’ is pointing to. Another example is “Strangely Speaking” where one pair of participants has to speak alternating only one word at a time and another pair has to respond by speaking at the exact same time. The goals here are to weave together a coherent dialogue by working together with your partner.

Through activities like these, the goal is to have participants learn and refine certain skills. These skills are boasted in the literature as distinctly unique from other types of experiential learning (Huffaker & West, 2005). They may include team building, communication skills, thinking on your feet, trust (Vowles, 1994), accepting and adding to the group (Vera & Crossan, 2005), increased flexibility, increased team satisfaction, and innovative problem solving skills (McKnight & Bontis, 2002). Also, in contrast to the outdoor and wilderness training sessions, scholars claim that everyone has the potential to learn and practice improvisational techniques (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Additionally, the literature claims that these workshops help to bridge the gap between learning and working environments; the improvisational skills used in these workshops claim to be skills that are a part of everyday life in the workplace (Corsun et al., 1996).

Most of the literature on improvisational workshops from business and management scholars focus on the parallels between improvisational theater and the workplace. Crossan et al. (1996) who observed workshops hosted by Second City articulate the parallels between both
traditional scripted theater and traditional management. They write that these similarities include prediction of environmental change, developing both short term and long term plans, and controlling the implementation of these plans; ultimately, that success is reliant on rigorous prediction and planning behaviors. In comparison, the authors draw a parallel between improvisational theater and a more improvisational oriented way of organizing. They even liken the elements of each; such as relating theatrical story development as managerial strategy, the cast as the organizational members, the ambiance as an organization’s culture and the audience as the customers or clients. And while these insights seem valid, in regards to the research that has been done on improvisational workshops, it is important to note that the majority of it comes from business and management scholars and thus focuses more on outcomes and terms like “effectiveness” (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Similarly, studies coming out of other disciplines focus only on results to determine whether or not it is ‘worthy’ for their field to attend these workshops (i.e. Gerber, 2007; Hoffman, 2012; Holmes, 2011).

While improvisational workshops may be growing in popularity, (Corsun et al., 2006) the literature has not kept up. While there are studies on improvisational workshops in varying disciplines, the literature is lacking in depth. Vera and Crossan (2005) write that there are limited theoretical studies available on improvisational workshops. Additionally, there are hardly any studies that address the difference between improvisational workshops and any other type of experiential or team building workshop that managers can attend. Overall, the literature that does exist is very descriptive (i.e. Crossan, 1998; Crossan et al., 1996, Hoffman, 2012; Holmes, 2011), outcome-driven, and empirically based (i.e. Hoffman, 2012; Mendonca & Fiedrich, 2006; Vera & Crossan, 2005). This is fairly contradictory to how the literature on improvisation as a concept is written as (intuitive, creative, fluid, holistic, paradoxical, etc.).
To aid to this more monolithic vision of what the literature on improvisational workshops entail, in attempt to describe what improvisation is, most of these studies break improvisation up into various ‘components’. These usually include pieces such as active listening and team-orientations (Vera & Crossan, 2005), embracing mistakes or errors as sources of learning instead of reasons for punishment (Montuori, 2003), working from minimal structures or guidelines for maximum flexibility (Barrett, 1998), emergent or turn-based leadership (Crossan et al., 1996), and utilizing the environment through bricolage (Weick, 1998). While it may be a useful exercise to describe what improvisation is by listing separate components, it seems against the conceptual nature of improvisation and does not speak to the participant’s perspective on what improvisation means to them.

The small amount of literature on improvisational workshops assumes that the translation between improvisational concepts and improvisational workshops is something that is a ‘given’ (i.e. Crossan, 1998). This assumption seems questionable. Firstly, the limited body of literature on improvisational workshops has much more breadth than depth. In other words, many different disciplines have done small empirically-based studies focused only on results (i.e. Hoffman, 2012; Holmes, 2011; Mendonca & Fiedrich, 2006); usually in the hard sciences arguing that improvisational workshops may provide a route to learning the “soft skills” (i.e. Hoffman, 2012; Mahaux, 2007) that they claim they need. Therefore, these studies are very outcome-driven. This is not in line with the nature of improvisation. Improvisation instead is process-driven (Vera & Crossan, 2004) and the outcomes are always unpredictable (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

Other works on improvisational workshops that come out of business and management skills mostly come from Crossan and her colleagues (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997; Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004, 2005). However, almost all of these works observe and study
improvisational workshops from the Second City Theater in Chicago. Second City is a very well-established improvisational troupe that in many ways has put improvisation “on the map.” Many famous comedians (i.e. Tina Fey, Stephan Colbert, etc.) have come out of Second City. In regards to their workshops for businesses; it has an entirely different website dedicated only to “corporate training”. And they not only offer improvisational workshops for businesses, but also services in developing advertising campaigns or videos and training videos with their troupe. They are well-known and well-used and have the luxury to separate their more ‘artistic’ services from their more ‘business-oriented’ services.

Therefore, the reasoning so far is that (1) there is limited literature on improvisational workshops, (2) this literature is fairly outcome-based and empirically-driven, and (3) what is written on improvisational workshops from an organizational studies perspective is also outcome-based and quantitative, and studies one of the most famous and renowned theater troupes in the nation. The characteristics of the literature on improvisational workshops seem to be at odds with the literature on improvisation as a concept and art form. Improvisational workshop literature is overall uncritical and assumes a straightforward translation from improvisation as art to improvisation as workshops. But, given the difficulties of transforming art forms into marketable platforms that I discussed above, it is expected to encounter some complications in this translation. All in all, improvisation as a concept and art form is written about as a holistic, fluid, creative, intuitive, and paradoxical process and improvisational workshops are written as quantitatively-based, outcome-driven and monolithic. These two framings do not match up very well.

These shortcomings in the literature pose an issue because these improvisational workshops are quickly growing in popularity (Corsun et al., 2006). And more and more
Improvisational troupes across the nation are offering these workshops for businesses (see the “Applied Improv Network” website). Therefore, it seems that these workshops for businesses as provided by various smaller improvisational troupes may instead be more nuanced and less monolithic in nature. Thus, there are two sets of concerns: (1) there are divergent notions between improvisation as a concept (including organizational improvisation) and improvisational workshops; and a large assumption that improvisational workshops stay true to these fairly fluid and artistic improvisational skills; and (2) there may be sacrifices when improvisational facilitators have to ‘package’ the product of workshops, therefore resulting in discrepancies in how participants see improvisation versus how the troupe sees improvisation.

Hence, there seems to be space for many different meanings, assumptions, or definitions of what improvisation is and how it can be implemented in the workplace. But these have not been adequately addressed by previous research. Due to these issues and differing meanings of what improvisational workshops may mean to participants, a valid question to ask then is how participants make sense of improvisation in these improvisational workshops. That is, we need to know much more about how people experience and understand improvisation as a result of these workshops. This will help us learn more about their nuanced nature and their value to participants and organizations. In order to do this, I turn to sensemaking. The process of sensemaking focuses on how people make sense of new or unknown situations and in turn explains how people retrospectively create meanings for these situations (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Studying these workshops through sensemaking will help us further understand participants’ perspectives and the nuanced nature of these workshops. Therefore, I turn to the concept of sensemaking in order to ‘set the stage’ to how participants make sense of improvisation in improvisational workshops.
Sensemaking

Generally defined, sensemaking is the process of retrospectively creating meaning and reducing equivocality for certain unknown or new situations or objects (Eisenberg, 2006; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). The theory of sensemaking has been around for decades and has been recently made popular by Karl Weick (see Weick, 1995). While sometimes encompassing more socio-psychological premises, sensemaking has been used by many organizational studies and organizational communication scholars alike as a useful theoretical lens of study. For the purposes of this study, I utilize sensemaking for several reasons. Firstly, sensemaking deals with how people make sense of unknown and new situations (Weick, 1995). For most people, improvisational workshops provide a new and unknown situation that may be made sense of and subsequently tied back to the workplace in some way. Secondly, the various inconsistencies in the literature on improvisation and improvisational workshops, in addition to the complication that art forms face when being ‘packaged’ to sell suggest that we need further understanding of how people understand these workshops. Thirdly, given the differences in perspectives, it is likely that people may experience improvisation differently. Therefore, I utilize sensemaking to understand how first-time attendees create different meanings of improvisation from an improvisational workshop in order to better understand these workshops and their value to the participants. Sensemaking though encompasses a wide body of thinking, so for the sake of this study, I will briefly discuss sensemaking more broadly and then move on to discuss certain components of this theory that is relevant to this study.

Sensemaking is generally defined as “the process by which people enact equivocal environments and interact in ways that seek to reduce that equivocality” (Eisenberg, 2006, p. 1695) and the constant process of retrospectively creating meanings for situations or events that
have happened (Weick, 1998). Sensemaking does not necessarily view equivocality as a ‘bad’
thing that must be eliminated. For instance, according to Eisenberg (2006), Weick argues that
equivocality is actually the fuel that motivates organizing. He explains further that “individuals
enact environments that vary in their degree of equivocality, which in turn leads everything that
‘happens’ in and around organizations to be subject to multiple (and often competing)
interpretations” (p. 1696). How these interpretations are made are through this process of
sensemaking; which is made up of several interdependent components.

Similar to improvisation, sensemaking is process-oriented (Weick, 1995) and is explained
as a significant process of organizing (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking has been
used in many studies by various communication scholars focusing on crisis communication
(Sellnow, Seeger, & Ulmer, 2002) and organizational communication through identity
management (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006), gender issues in the workplace (Buzzanell et al.,
2005), emotion in the workplace (Magala, 1997), and organizational change (Mills, 2003) just to
name a few. These studies mostly focus on investigating how individuals, groups, and
organizations make sense of a given situation or event. However, sensemaking can go beyond
merely understanding a ‘correct’ definition or context for a situation; one of the main principles
of sensemaking as written by Weick (1995) is that plausibility of an individual’s story or account
is more important than its accuracy. In addition, sensemaking requires engaging and enacting the
surrounding environment to create palpable and subjective meaning. For example, Weick (1995)
writes that “to engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame, create facility, and render the
subjective into something more tangible” (p. 13-4).

Weick’s (1995) book on sensemaking in organizations is a detailed look at this concept
and provides details on seven different components of the sensemaking process. These seven
components are identity construction, retrospect, enacting environments, being social, ongoing, focusing on and extracting cues, and finally, being driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (p. 17). For the purposes of this study, I will focus in particular on the retrospective and social aspects as well as plausibility being favored over accuracy. This is because of the space for multiple meanings and inconsistent responses according to the facilitator or literature in how participants may make sense of improvisation as a result from improvisational workshops.

_Retrospect, Sociality, and Plausibility in Sensemaking_

Sensemaking is retrospective. Weick (1995) writes that we live in a constant flow of moments and it is not until we are able to look back at these moments that we then make sense of them; which means then that we are always slightly ‘behind’ real time in our sensemaking. And all of these moments that are occurring now will affect how we make sense of a given situation that has already happened. Additionally, “stimulus-response” causation is not sufficient to capture sensemaking; instead, sometimes the outcomes determine how we make sense of a situation since we are constantly viewing events in retrospect (Garfinkel, 1967). Therefore, meanings that are created through sensemaking may shift and change as projects and goals change (Weick, 1995). Though, as Weick (1995) writes “meaning is not ‘attached to’ the experience that is singled out…instead, the meaning is in the kind of attention that is directed to this experience” (p. 26). And this experience that constitutes sensemaking might not be clear or ‘right’; instead, it is equivocal because it makes “many different kinds of sense” (p. 27). And it becomes an individual’s job to synthesize the possible meanings retrospectively.

Sensemaking is also a social process (Weick, 1995). Most times, meanings are shaped through interactions with others; therefore, sensemaking is never a purely individualized thing
because much of what we do hinges on others (Weick, 1995). However, Weick (1995) is careful to stress that the social nature of sensemaking does not mean that sensemaking creates and is contingent on shared meanings. Instead, as Czarniawska-Joerges (1992) argues, the “shared meaning is not what is crucial for collective action, but rather it is the experience of the collective action that is shared” (p. 42). Therefore, sensemaking is social in nature; but not in the sense of forcing a collective or shared meaning.

Lastly, sensemaking is “driven by plausibility rather than accuracy” (Weick, 1995, p. 96). Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) write that accuracy is not a bad thing to have; but it is not necessary in order for action to be taken. As Sutcliffe (1994) argues, inaccurate perceptions may actually lead to positive outcomes. Similarly, in sensemaking, what matters more than “getting it right” (Weick, Sutcliffe, Obstfeld, 2005) is creating and investing in a dynamic story of your own (Weick, 1995). This story may account for an experience or experiences that remains interesting, attractive, or goal-related (Fiske, 1992). Therefore, it is this story that drives action; whether or not it is ‘correct’ is not as important in sensemaking. In many situations in organizations, speed becomes the most important; therefore waiting to achieve an accurate perception of a situation may be more detrimental when time is on the line (Weick, 1995). While it may seem foolish to favor plausibility over accuracy, Weick (1995) argues that accuracy is not what sensemaking is about because individuals make sense of many different things in ways that might not be deemed ‘accurate’ by others. He writes that “given multiple cues, with multiple meanings for multiple audiences, accurate perception of ‘the’ object seems like a doomed intention. Making sense of that object, however, seems more plausible and more likely” (p. 57); therefore, “all possible truth is practical” (p. 59).
It is this notion of plausibility that is particularly relevant for understanding how participants make sense of improvisation as a result of improvisational workshops. Firstly, it allows for multiple meanings held by multiple individuals. As discussed above, there seems to be space for individuals to create meanings that may be plausible though not accurate during improvisational workshops; plausible be being whatever is goal-related or interesting to individuals (Fiske, 1992; Weick, 1995). Secondly, plausibility’s aspects of speed and stories are also central to improvisational acts. The advantage of speed in plausible stories over accuracy is something that sensemaking has in common with improvisation. For instance, when improvisation is stripped down to the simplest definition, it usually involves the limited and sparse amount of time between conception and execution (Vendelo, 2009). The notion of the importance of speed from time to time in organizations is similar to the importance of improvisation in organizations. Secondly, the characteristic of plausibility driving sensemaking instead of accuracy is something that improvisation also shares. For instance, the element of stories is very important to improvisation; additionally, these stories are embodied. Improvisation has been called dialectical (Vera & Crossan, 2005) and so is the element of stories. For instance, as Montuori (2003) cites Kearney (1988) “improvisers tell a story—they are a story” (p. 246).

In sum, sensemaking centers on retrospectively creating meanings that may be plausible though not accurate. This serves the purpose of further understanding how participants make sense of improvisation as a result of improvisational workshops. Plausibility grants the flexibility that if participants’ meanings of improvisations are inaccurate with the facilitator or the literature, it does not mean that they cannot benefit from improvisational workshops. To further explore these notions, I will now turn to the research questions of this study.
Research Questions

(1) How do participants understand improvisational workshops in relation to other forms of experiential learning and team building?

(2) Are there inconsistencies and discrepancies (as seen from the literature or the facilitator) in how people make sense of improvisation as a result from participating in the workshop?

(3) How do participants talk about connecting or incorporating improvisational workshops to their work? And if so, do participants talk about their interpretation of improvisation as being applicable or not applicable to how they work?

In the following section, I will discuss my research site, data collection, and data analysis followed by the findings of the study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To begin, it is important to discuss the range and nature of this project. As mentioned earlier in this paper, this is a small exploratory case study to begin to expose any sort of nuance found within an improvisational workshop and how participants make sense of them. And while the amount of data is on one improvisational troupe and one improvisational workshop, I was able to conduct a comprehensive study of this one workshop. In addition, the size of this study does not take away from some contributions this study may have. According to Yin (1981), a case study represents a research strategy that attempts to examine “a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context” (p. 59) and the given dynamics of a single social setting (Eisenhardt, 1989). Essentially, case studies are used by researchers in many different social contexts when wanting to discover “complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Its format has long been defended by scholars (Yin, 1981) as being viable, sound, and even able to produce theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, for the purposes of this study, the main goal is that this method of research “allows investigators to retain holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Therefore, this project is not meant to generalize all improvisational troupes, facilitators, and workshops, but instead to begin to shed light on the nuanced nature of an improvisational workshop and how participants make sense of improvisation in an improvisational workshop.

Research Site
The Metropolitan Theater\textsuperscript{1} is a professional improvisational theater troupe in Denver, Colorado. They specialize in both improvisational training and productions. The theater has many available classes for interested students of all levels to learn more about and practice improvisation. In addition, the theater also produces shows (almost nightly) with both current students and the rotating ‘in-house’ troupe. The in-house troupe consists of ‘graduates’ of improvisation classes and other improvisational artists who audition to volunteer to perform on whatever night their able. Also, the troupe advertises improvisational workshops for businesses. On their website, they describe their approach as practically-oriented. It is representative of an experiential learning approach; they write that want participants to have a tangible embodied experience with improvisation and then aid in making mental connections afterward. The Metropolitan Theater advertises that some of their most popular forms and focuses of these workshops include promoting or exercising creativity, embracing change, improving your bottom line (sales), ‘just for fun’ improv, thinking on your feet, and team building (theater’s website, 2013\textsuperscript{2}). Once a manager or business is interested, they contact the theater and share what they would like out of the workshop. From here, the lead facilitator Colin creates a workshop that can range in time from a couple of hours to a whole day. Throughout the workshop, Colin facilitates exercises for the participants and after each exercise has a discussion about the exercise itself and then begins to propose how these skills can be applied to their workplace; much like the team building and experiential learning formats that was discussed in the literature review above.

This thesis study focuses on one of these workshops as well as subsequent interviews of the branch managers involved. Upon making contact with this site, I entered with a grounded and

\textsuperscript{1} All names of companies and participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

\textsuperscript{2} The website cited is unspecified in order to protect participant confidentiality.
inductive based approach and perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in order to let the site and the participants inform me in determining what the project should focus on specifically. I entered with a very broad idea of investigating improvisational workshops to see what the practical implications were for organizations and, more theoretically, for organizational communication.

**Data Collection**

*Field Observation*

For this study, I observed a Metropolitan Theater workshop and interviewed the branch manager participants afterwards. I was able to attend this workshop by making initial contact with Colin in the summer of 2012 and by negotiating access to the site. In total, the data for this study were in the form of an observation of a workshop, interviews, various written responses from workshop participants, along with the Metropolitan Theater website to supplement my analysis. Additionally, I interviewed two other facilitators for initial information on the culture and nature of improvisational workshops; Randall, based out of Seattle and Peter, based out of Las Vegas. After obtaining human subjects approval, I attended a four-hour long workshop on October 10, 2012 that Colin facilitated at the Metropolitan Theater. A local credit union hired Colin to have a one-day workshop at the theater. In total, the workshop was attended by roughly 16 branch managers.

The focus of this workshop was primarily to have fun, and also to team build, increase “thinking on your feet” skills, and accepting and building these skills for the workplace. Colin let me sit in the back after introducing me to the group and after the workshop he walked me through the process of how he tailors each workshop specifically for his client’s needs. During breaks, I was able to informally chat with Jeff, the Vice President of the region, who hired Colin to facilitate a workshop for his group of branch managers. I was also able to chat with branch
managers during the break. The managers that attended the workshop all managed their own branch of the local credit union and had never attended an improvisational workshop before. Jeff was essentially their manager being Vice President of the region. Every once in a while, I was told they get together for monthly meetings and the company Christmas party. Some branch managers though were close friends and spent time with each other outside of work. However, in the time span from the workshop to the interviews I conducted a few months later, managers had left, been promoted, and new managers had been hired. Therefore, the managers that had a longer seniority usually were close. But, overall, they did not usually work together in the same space since they primarily worked in their own separate branches.

During the observation, I followed Lindlof and Taylor’s (2011) guidelines on conducting responsible tactical observations. These guidelines include adopting the site member’s perspective while maintaining an ethical stance. I did this by writing detailed and descriptive field notes without forcing my own perspective onto the observation. I transcribed the observational data on a notepad and the following day I transferred these scratch notes to my computer. During this process I upheld Lindlof and Taylor’s (2011) criteria for effective field notes by revising my scratch notes and reflecting on the observation itself. In total, I accumulated 12 single-spaced pages of text from this field observation.

Interviews

Initially, I interviewed three facilitators, including Colin, in informal open-ended interviews in order to begin to grasp the nature and culture of improvisational performance and improvisational workshops. After the workshop observation in October, I was able to conduct nine in-depth phone interviews with both Jeff and several branch managers that volunteered (see Appendix for an interview guide). Most of these interviews were conducted roughly four to five
months after the workshop. These interviews were designed as vehicles for understanding explanations and were appropriate outlets for the participants to “disclose their subjective standpoints” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 179). They consisted of open-ended questions to allow the interviewees to respond freely with probing questions for elaboration (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). There were nine total phone interviews with the workshop participants and the questions asked revolved around the research questions posed earlier in the paper. In these interviews, I asked questions that centered on the workshop and improvisation in general. More specifically, questions on their definitions of improvisation, what they took away from the workshop, and how applicative improvisation is to their own work as well as questions on the difference (if any) they feel that improvisational workshops have compared to any other instances of team building or experiential learning. Within those nine interviews, two of them were with the Vice President of the region, Jeff. I interviewed Jeff a few weeks following the workshop and conducted a second one with him roughly five months after the workshop. The nine total recorded and transcribed interviews equaled to roughly five hours; which equaled to roughly 60 single-spaced pages of transcribed data.

In addition to field notes and interviews, I also collected written responses. After the workshop, Jeff and Colin asked the participants to write three takeaways from the workshop and how they will apply what they learned from the workshops to the workplace. These written responses were given by all participants that attended the workshop, 16 in total, and were sent via email during the next few days following the workshop. In addition, Colin, in his own attempt to gain open-ended responses on the results of his workshops, asked via email some past clients (including Jeff) of a few months to a few years some questions. These questions included what they felt the biggest takeaways from the workshop were, if and when these effects were
applied in a real-life situation, and any long term effects on the group. The written responses equaled 13 single-spaced pages of textual data. In total, the field observation, interviews, and the written responses equaled around 75 single-spaced pages of data. I then analyzed these various sets of data, as I will describe further in the following section.

Data Analysis

I followed a grounded and inductive process for this study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and thus, the categories and codes arose primarily out of the collected data. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) write, the data analysis process follows categories and codes that essentially shift in their subsequent definitions as research is conducted; following a certain “logic of discovery” (p. 250) and attempting to locate and explore issues coming directly from the site. Therefore, aligning with the process that qualitative data analysis instigates, I started by manually analyzing the collected data through categories and codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In line with Spiggle (1994), I identified categories that seemed to represent an example of a broader phenomenon. I also utilized coding to sift through the data (as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In alignment with grounded theory, the categorization and coding process was reflexively examined through the present data as well as my own experience in the field and with the participants at the workshop and during interviews. After this, I integrated these produced codes through axial coding; and essentially began to sketch out meaningful connections between categories.

To further explain the coding and categorization process, I first began by reading through the data various times and then manually coded initial words and phrases. Then these words and phrases were compared to see what larger themes arose out of the data. For example, I coded fairly broad and explicit instances of realizations and takeaways; but, several more implicit
instances of broader themes. For instance, one category I developed was talk around an “authentic self.” This was made up of participants’ describing their fellow participants as somehow becoming ‘more of themselves’; phrases such as becoming “less reserved” or “more comfortable” or observing others “blossom” and witnessing a “different side” of their peers.

This process was repeated for various codes and categories that were then whittled down in to main categories that compose my case study. Therefore, through utilizing conceptual devices discussed during data analysis with my adviser as well as Lindolf and Taylor’s (2011) list of useful devices to correspond possible parallels between categories; I found that the findings were fairly inconsistent with one another and the facilitator of the workshop, as I will explain further in the following section.
Overall, the findings for this study arose in the form of responses that were inconsistent or discrepant; either inconsistent with each other or the literature and the lessons from the workshop on improvisation. In this section, I will elaborate in detail the findings of each of the three research questions and then connect these findings back to sensemaking in order to demonstrate how sensemaking adds insight to these findings.

**Improvisational workshops and other forms of experiential learning**

My first research question asked how participants understand improvisational workshops in relation to other forms of experiential learning or team building. During the interviews, I asked each manager if they participated in any other sort of team building activities outside of work with the other branch managers. They all responded that the branch managers do not usually get together for formal activities or team building-like sessions (instead they have monthly meetings); but, some of them do certain activities within their own branches. For example, participants commented that they participate in small activities during meetings. For instance, one branch manager told me about an exercise where she asked her employees to draw as many boxes as they could see on a square grid of dots. Afterwards, they discussed how many boxes they had and why this was the case. This activity was called a “thinking outside the box” activity by this branch manager and was used to get to know the other employees “as people instead of coworkers.” Other activities include painting classes, hikes, barbeques, holiday parties, trips to Dave and Busters, etc. I then asked them what they felt the difference was (if any) from these kinds of activities and the improvisational workshops.
There were roughly two types of responses from the managers. The first was that some managers believed that improvisational workshops were different from other forms of teambuilding; others thought that improvisational workshops were just the same. For instance, some participants responded that they believed the improvisational workshop was inherently different, that it offered more benefits than social outings or “hanging out” because there was “a specific idea behind it.” Additionally, some of them recognized that those more informal outside of work activities may just purely be for fun and nothing more. Jacob commented that: “I’ve always done things like we might do a dinner at Dave and Busters. Where you know the whole team comes together and we grab dinner and then we play the arcade and that’s just pure fun.” Jacob stated that these activities are only for fun, to essentially “take the work element out…and bring the personal element into it.” He went on to comment that the improvisational workshop “was a completely unique experience.”

I definitely think it’s different…The one thing that I told [Jeff]…that I really liked about it and in the end the thing that made it the most different was it made me think. So, I had to use my imagination. I had to think outside the box…It was like a brain exercise I guess I would say. Where the hike is like a physical exercise, the Dave and Busters or Rockies games, those were fun, but this actually gave my mind a challenge. And for me, I really like that. I love being challenged…So, I think that’s what separated it from everything else because it was a challenge. I think it was something that we really had to; not only be engaged, but you really had to think about [it] and you had to be creative with it. Where a lot of the other things are passive, they’re group activities…I also think at the end of the day, out
of all the activities that I’ve done through work and sort of team building stuff, it was the most engaging.

As seen in this response, Jacob clearly believed that improvisational workshops and more informal team-building or fun oriented activities are quite different. According to Jacob, the improvisational workshop was different because it offered a “mind challenge”; whereas the other activities are either just physically or socially-oriented. Therefore, Jacob saw improvisation as fundamentally different from any other type of team building that can occur outside of work. While this piece of data represents the perspective that some had on improvisational workshops being fundamentally different, other participants had a different opinion on the matter.

Other participants believed that improvisational workshops were no different than other forms of activities outside of work. For instance, Deborah commented that overall, she felt improvisational workshops were the same as any other activity you can do outside of work with colleagues. When I asked about her own branch attending an improvisational workshop she said:

I think we should have more…maybe quarterly team building experiences like that. Whether we go bowling or do improv again…whatever we try. But to be offsite, to not discuss our goals and our numbers…I believe that the position that we’re in, we’re all very conscious of that on a day-to-day basis. But to use that more as a reward, like hey we’re going to go do this fun team building experience today.

Notice how Deborah essentially equated improvisational workshops with bowling as a “fun team building experience.” She generalized that either something like the improvisational workshop or bowling is only for the purpose of not discussing work and instead doing something
fun with the group as a reward of some sort. Overall, Deborah believed that improvisational workshops do not necessarily offer anything more than bowling can. For the most part, managers believed in one side of this response or the other. In other words, most branch managers did not find themselves caught in between this discrepancy. However, there were a couple of instances of branch managers getting themselves caught within the discrepancy and essentially going back and forth in how they made sense of improvisational workshops being different from or the same as other team building activities.

The best examples of this occurrence are through Brenda and Jeff. Brenda did a recreational painting class as a team building activity within her own branch. This painting class was not oriented towards businesses, but instead a ‘run-of-the-mill’ painting class at a local community center. I asked what she believed the difference was between this painting class and the improvisational workshop she attended. Brenda began with commenting that the improvisational workshop was different from the painting class; but, then began to have some second thoughts about that claim. She began by saying:

The improv definitely provided you…more opportunity to take away things you can apply towards every day. Like the…activities of…yes and. We didn’t get that in painting. I mean we learned how to hold a brush, which truly doesn’t apply to anything that we [do]. It was more a creative release versus practical tools that you could apply.

Here, Brenda would seem to agree with Jacob in terms of the value that can come out of the improvisational workshop and its application to the workplace. However, she began to shift this belief immediately following the above statement. She continued to say:
And now that I see that, ugh...'cause you know one of the great things that came out of it—the painting was...it reinforced who they could depend on. So when you needed someone that [was] detail oriented and task to the point, our painting class reinforced that...I don’t necessarily know that with the concept of team building between improv and painting that there is a lot of difference, it’s truly...what you put into it, you’re going to get out.

Here, Brenda came to the conclusion that “what you put into it, you’re going to get out.” Therefore, regardless of what activity you are participating in, she believes that participants will get out whatever they “put in.” She discussed this further in the following excerpt.

Well, and then as I start to think about it too, it’s all in what you take out of it ‘cause truly...there’s something in everything that you do that can be reapplied to what you do at work. Every single thing that you do, from driving your car, or you know do you get road rage or do you give yourself enough time to—you know all of those will impact your work. And depending on how you filter through it...so now that I’ve thought about it, even hiking you’re going to get out of it what you put into it. And there are things that apply to... [our credit union]. It’s all about a happy well trained team who enjoys what they do. And those activities lead to it just like improv does.

Brenda reiterated her claim by saying “I get out what I put into it” and that if she wanted to improve herself and her team, “I’m going to take that from every workshop that I do.” And that everything can be applied to the workplace; no matter what it is. Though at the end of this quote, she said, “it’s all about a happy well trained team who enjoys what they do” and getting
there can be through utilizing an improvisational workshop, hiking, painting, or any number of activities. Therefore, in a roundabout way, the conclusion that Brenda reached is that improvisation is just like any other form of team building or activity; and hence, there is nothing unique to get out of improvisational workshops.

The second example of a participant getting ‘caught’ between these two responses was from Jeff, the Vice President of the region who decided to have the group attend an improvisational workshop. I first asked Jeff why he chose to have the group of branch managers attend an improvisational workshop. Jeff responded by calling himself a “believer” of improvisation. In the two interviews I conducted with him, he often spoke about the transferability quality of improvisational workshops to his own work mostly through humor, vulnerability, and being able to think on your feet. However, following this I asked him if he would take the same group back to another improvisational workshop. This is how he responded:

The same group I think would be challenging...because they’ve already been exposed to it...When I had pitched this to them—that I was working on doing this, they were scared. They were scared. And they didn’t know what to expect and I didn’t tell them what to expect either; all I said was trust me and trust the process. And you guys’ll be fine. I mean, I literally had people the night before...calling their peers and [saying] I don’t think I could do this. So, if they knew what they were getting into...doing the same workshop again, it would be challenging. It wouldn’t have the same impact. You know, they walked away feeling hot...I mean they were all fired up...I like the shock treatment so I don’t—I have to find the next shock treatment for them.
Notice that while Jeff labeled himself as an improvisation advocate and is readily available to list the impacts that improvisational interaction can have in the workplace and in life, he equated improvisation as just another “shock treatment” and stated that he needed to find the next one for the group. He claimed that improvisation would not have the same impact because the branch managers would know what they are getting themselves into. Therefore, Jeff’s responses seemed to be contradictory or at least inconsistent. Additionally, he seemed to be underplaying the importance of practice and repetition in improvisation (Berliner, 1994; Weick, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005) in not wanting to attend another workshop. Improvisational skills are constantly being refined through practice; though, Jeff seemed to believe that the workshop is a one-time occurrence that either works or does not work. Therefore, while Jeff was an improvisation advocate and supported and practiced many improvisational principles at work, he found the workshop in relation to his employees as just another shock treatment; he would not have them attend another one. In a sense, while he claimed that he supports and utilizes improvisational skills, he did not treat improvisation as any different from other experiential learning workshops. In addition, during the workshop, I had an informal chat with him during the break and he claimed that the workshop was “better than just another happy hour.”

In summation, the responses to this particular question arose as a set of inconsistent beliefs between branch managers. One opinion was that the improvisational workshop was unique and offered specific takeaways for the workplace that other forms cannot offer; while another belief was that the workshop offered nothing more than any other sort of team building or informal outside of work activity. And two participants, Brenda and Jeff, were caught in between the two responses and found themselves shifting their meanings of what improvisation meant to them. My overall response to the first research question is that participants made sense
of the value of improvisational workshops in different ways, though all participants claimed they did get something out of the workshop. This demonstrates that these different (though reasonable) responses of the difference or similarity between improvisational workshops and other forms of experiential learning or team building points to the notion of plausibility in sensemaking. This is the case because participants developed plausible ‘stories’ or meanings in how improvisation related to their own work; this example was workshops being the same or different than other forms of experiential learning. In addition, this notion of plausibility also was found in the multiple (though reasonable) meanings of improvisation held by branch managers.

**Inconsistencies in how participants made sense of improvisation**

The second research question of this study focused on any sort of inconsistencies or discrepancies in how participants made sense of improvisation as a result of attending the improvisational workshop. There were several sets of inconsistencies found in the data in regards to participant’s meanings of improvisation. These discrepancies were either inconsistent with the facilitator, the literature, or other participants. These inconsistencies include (1) making sense of improvisation as reactive versus proactive; (2) the language of “the improv” versus “improv” or improvisation as an object versus a process; (3) improvisation as natural versus unnatural; and (4) being onstage or performing versus showcasing an “authentic self.” In the following section, I will further explore these inconsistencies and share some exemplars in the data. These inconsistencies represent how participants held plausible though sometimes inaccurate perceptions (according to the literature or facilitator) of what improvisation means. By plausible, I mean that participants connected their own meanings of improvisation to their work; representing what is ‘goal-related’ according to Fiske (1992) and Weick (1995).

*Reactive versus Proactive*
The first inconsistency that arose in the data was one of making sense of the act of improvisation as either reactive or proactive, or somewhere in between. As discussed in the literature review, improvisation is seen as reactive in nature (Corsun et al., 2006). It revolves around the premise of reacting accordingly when there is hardly any time to consider exactly what to say (Larson, 2011). This takeaway was discussed in the workshop through verbiage such as “eliminating judgment in your head” and “just reacting”; and that in general, you cannot listen to that doubting voice inside of your head when you have time constraints. At one point during my field observation of the workshop, Colin congratulated the group after an exercise by saying that everyone was very present and did not preconceive what to say onstage. Therefore, the importance of reaction is something that most improvisation researchers and facilitators agree on.

However, while the importance of presence and reaction was discussed in the workshop and some participants reiterated this in both the interviews and the written responses, some responded without prompt that improvisation was also about being proactive. For example, one branch manager claimed that the workshop focused on the managerial skill of “being proactive prior to reacting to something after it’s happened.” This particular branch manager explained that this sense of “proactive” is getting to know those who you will be interacting with well enough so that you have an idea of what they are going to say. While in the improvisational literature, when an improviser predicts what someone is going to say, they are no longer improvising (Weick, 1998). However, others said this concept of reacting without prior conception applied to their own work. Another branch manager said just this in an interview:

I could see it especially relating to being able to work better with our members [customers]… ‘cause sometimes we think we know what the member’s going to
say or and we’re already starting to formulate an answer. So [you] could use 
things like “yes and…” It will allow you to listen more to your member and allow 
your member to open up more.

Here, Katrina explained that improvisational techniques such as “yes and…” can help 
managers move away from attempting to predict what members are going to say. Another branch 
manager acknowledged that improvisation does involve reaction, but also being proactive; 
incorporating both sides of this discrepancy. For instance, Stella claimed that:

I feel like it not only works as a response, but it also works as—I mean, when 
you’re doing improv, you’re trying to think about what that person is going to say 
next or do next that you can try to think about your next step. So, not only is it 
reactive, but you’re trying to be proactive as well; to try to get your brain moving 
towards—alright, if they go here, then I could do this, which aligns in the way 
that we’re taught with our coaching of our employees so…it’s both proactive and 
reactive.

Stella seemed to straddle the diverging line between these two conflicting sides. She said 
here that while improvisation is reactive, it is also proactive. And while as mentioned above, this 
may be something that improvisational scholars and practitioners may disagree with, she related 
this technique to her position as a manager in a positive light. This application to the workplace 
was seen in a similar quote from another manager who claimed that practicing improvisational 
skills and techniques can help in being skilled enough (used in the word ‘proactive’) as a 
manager in order to react effectively; in other words, having the proper skill set to being able to
react accordingly. Therefore, meanings of improvisation consisted of both reactive and proactive properties. Another inconsistency arose in the data that also had to do with specific word choice.

“The Improv” Versus “Improv”: Object versus Process

Some participant’s used the phrase “the improv” when referring to improvisation or the workshop itself, while others simply said “improv”. In the data there were 18 references to “the improv” from roughly six branch managers. This pattern is possibly telling of another belief held by participants. When saying “the improv”, the preface of “the” seems to imply improvisation as an object; it singularizes improvisation and makes it more objective. This is in opposition to what “improv” without the “the” represents: a process, which was discussed in the literature review above. Two examples of “the improv” being used by Jacob and Stella stand out:

Jacob: I feel that where the improv would have happened naturally at work, it still occurs and much in the same way as it did before.

Stella: …that kind of really helps us when we’re doing the improv you know when things come up throughout the day that we’re working on…it just kind of helps get through those interactions.

In both of these examples, the branch managers referred to the process of improvisation as “the improv” suggesting it is a thing, not a process. This caught my attention because it was not what I was used to hearing from facilitators and artists. Therefore, in these examples improvisation seems to be talked about more as an object than as a process. However, in other examples of the phrase “the improv” being used, some participants used it to refer to the workshop specifically. Regardless, it seems to diminish this concept of improvisation as being an
important and fluid piece of organizing (i.e. organizational improvisation); instead it seems to situate it into a static state that can only occur through the workshop.

However, other participants did refer to the act of improvisation as just “improv”, therefore making sense of it as more of a process than as an object. Here are some examples from participants:

Beatrice: Improv is taking an idea or concept and without any kind of study, immediately acting upon it.

Denise: I think improv can make you feel comfortable, I think it can make you feel expand in your ideas in how to do things.

Bill: In that manner, that’s how we improv; there’s that structure to our day, we open at nine and close at six, but in between there’s really isn’t …much that’s standard.

In these examples, participants referred to improvisation as “improv.” They represented improvisation more as a process rather than an object. And did not confine improvisation to just the workshop; instead they discussed the concept as possibly appearing outside of the workshop. Overall, there was an inconsistency in branch managers’ word choice of “the improv” as more of a static object versus “improv” as more of a process. In the third discrepancy discussed in this research question, I will explore the inconsistent responses surrounding improvisation seen as natural versus unnatural as found in the data.

*Improvisation as natural versus unnatural*
Throughout the interviews, participants talked about improvisation as very natural; something that people can inherently have as a trait or as fairly unnatural and more of a skill that inevitably needs to be initiated and developed. These responses came up indirectly, usually when they were asked about improvisational acts occurring before the workshop. Some branch managers claimed both during the workshop and in interviews that it felt unnatural, uncomfortable, and fairly difficult to do. Colin himself opened the workshop with stating that improvisation is about seeing things in different ways, taking chances and moving forward, and that all in all; it is not a natural process or inclination.

For example, at times in the workshop, participants would ‘break the rules’ of the game somehow and Colin would lightly scold them. An instance of this was during the improvisational picture activity. In this activity, Colin juxtaposed formal and structured picture-taking of the whole group with spontaneous and immediate picture taking. Essentially, to make the point that pure reaction with no planning or structure in how the picture was organized can lead to a better picture or outcome in general. During the spontaneous picture, the group walks around the stage, filling up any empty space, waiting for Colin to yell “go!” Once he does this, the branch managers come together as fast as they can for a picture before Colin counts to three. However, during the debriefing session, Colin asked how the exercise felt and one participant responded that they were able to strategize and planned to linger in a certain area depending on their height. Colin responded with a light-hearted “I told you, you weren’t supposed to do that!” In general, they were lightly breaking the rules due to a natural inclination to strategize instead of purely react with no preconceived plan.

This sentiment continued through the workshop. For instance, during the debriefings that followed each exercise, participants would share whether or not they struggled and why that was
the case. For example, one participant admitted that she struggled with a certain exercise and claimed that it was not natural for her to act in such an unprepared fashion. Colin took that moment to discuss that overthinking in these exercises makes things more difficult and reiterated some of the main focuses; such as the principle of “yes and…” This participant then commented that while she understood, she said that she is even better when she is prepared and when she is not, she automatically gets ‘stuck in her own head’. Therefore, while part of the workshop itself was about having fun, some branch managers had an inherently hard time letting go and were fairly uncomfortable in just reacting and feeling unprepared. Overall, some branch managers felt that the act of improvising did not come easy and felt fairly unnatural.

While improvisation may have felt unnatural for some, for others they felt right at home when improvising during the workshop. Some managers believed that they were honestly very good at improvisation, performing, and ‘being funny’ because they believed it was a part of who they are. For example, Joseph explained that he believed the ability to improvise was more of a natural trait:

I think it’s a trait that somebody would have. I think the ability to change and adjust in those manners, in the manners needed, is a trait that someone would have. But certainly a skill that can be honed…somebody that’s an extreme analytic…doesn’t adapt well to change; somebody that’s a little more amiable or expressive typically does…So, that would slightly depend on an individual personality type I think.

In the quote above, Joseph explained that the ability to improvise effectively relies on natural traits and personality type. That, overall, some people are inherently better at improvising
than others. Accordingly, Deborah expressed a similar sentiment: “…and how natural it came to some people and how you could tell it was very hard for other [managers] to get that routine together. I thought that I was probably one of the better ones.”

She continued and said very jokingly that “in all honesty I think they probably want me to join their improv team.” When I pressed her on this, to explain why she felt that way, she responded that it mostly had to do with her character, just the kind of person she is. Therefore, the belief of improvisation as being a natural or personal trait was something believed by some branch managers. And this stands in contrast to the belief held by some managers and scholars that improvisation is more unnatural and strictly skill-oriented; that you must learn and refine it in order to be an effective improviser. The fourth inconsistency in meanings of improvisation found in the data had to do with either performing or portraying an “authentic-self” while improvising.

Onstage- or performing-self versus “authentic-self”

The fourth discrepancy centered on being onstage or performing during improvisation or at work versus showcasing an “authentic self” through improvisation. Some managers made sense of improvisation in a way that related to their work because they both instilled sorts of performance. The sentiment “always being onstage” came up several times in the data. For example, a lot of these beliefs were found in the written responses on direct takeaways from the workshop to the workplace. Some examples are listed below:

Monica: As leaders we are always onstage.
Crista: As leaders we are always on stage and [we] set the stage for our team. How we act and react is mirrored by the ones that trust us and [they] will follow the example.

Bill: You’re always onstage, even when you’re not the primary focus…

Bill: Ensuring our staff realizes they are on stage with not only an audience of our members, but their supporting cast of coworkers as well.

In these responses, managers expressed this claim that by being leaders of their teams; the workplace becomes a stage of sorts. Here, they had to perform in order to set an example for their employees. However, a different sentiment was expressed by other branch managers about improvisation bringing about an “authentic self.” This was found in responses from managers that expressed witnessing their peers ‘break out of their shells’ or showing a different side while improvising. An exemplar quote representing this belief can be found in what Deborah expressed:

I think one of the biggest things about the improv… [was that it brought] more insight on managers who I thought were very conservative like…you know more of a loner. And they really blossomed and came out. And you could really see their personalities. So…that was probably one of the biggest takeaways I had from it.

Deborah discussed how she assumed some of her peers were more introverted loner types, but goes on to say that through the improvisational workshop; she was able to watch them “blossom.” She continued later on in the interview to further discuss seeing a different side to her peers:
And coming out of that and seeing a different side of them. ‘Cause you know...if you just pursue someone’s personality as the way it is and you don’t really know them—I think that opened it up a lot to see a different side of everyone.

Deborah’s responses showed this experience felt by some branch managers that the workshop created an opportunity for managers to loosen up, express themselves, and display a different and more extroverted side to them. During the workshop, this was seen and articulated after some exercises. For example, the picture exercise that was briefly discussed above ended up producing pictures of the branch managers with silly faces and body postures. During the debriefing of this exercise, some managers commented on how fun it was to see everyone act so silly. Brenda also commented on this during the interview. She said that the photograph that was taken “on the fly” displayed more personality and represented more of who they were as people.

The improvisational workshop may provide an opportunity to express ‘who you really are’ without the potentially strict confines of the workplace. But, overall, there was a discrepancy between understanding improvisation and the workplace as places of performing versus as bringing out more of an “authentic self.”

To summarize, there were four inconsistencies or discrepancies found in the data that speak to the different meanings that the managers developed on improvisation from the improvisational workshop. By inconsistent, this meant that the managers’ responses were either inconsistent with one another or inconsistent with the literature or facilitator of the workshop. These included (1) making sense of improvisation as reactive versus proactive; (2) the language of “the improv” versus “improv” or improvisation as an object versus a process; (3) improvisation as natural versus unnatural; and (4) being onstage or performing versus showcasing an “authentic self.” Most of these inconsistencies in meanings seem to center on
differing definitions of what improvisation is. For instance, seeing improvisation as reactive versus proactive, an object or a process, unnatural or natural, performing or bringing about more authenticity in participants speaks on how differently the managers define and make sense of improvisation. Each manager had a varying definition for what entails improvisation given what aspects they felt made up improvisation. However, a worthy question is how the managers talked about these meanings of improvisation relating to the workplace. In other words, do the various meanings of what improvisation is affect what manager’s believe it can do in the workplace? In the following section, I will discuss the responses that managers had when they talked about connecting the improvisational workshop to the work they do every day.

**Talk on connecting or incorporating improvisational workshops to work**

In the third research question of this study, I asked how participants talked about relating improvisational workshops to their work; and if so, if they talked about this interpretation of improvisation as applicable or not applicable to their work. I will explain these findings by first discussing the responses that dealt with improvisation as applying to their work and then discuss the responses that claimed that improvisation does not apply to their work.

The topic of improvisation applying or not applying to the workplace was a popular one that many managers discussed in detail. Overall, some made sense of improvisation as seen through the workshop as applying to not only their work, but life itself; something that everyone does every day. A couple examples are as follows:

Joseph: I had never formally been in an improv class before—but yeah, it’s sort of what we do on a daily basis anyway; ‘cause you’re never really sure what’s going to walk through your door.
Jeff: I think improv has a lot to do with life, right? It’s all made up. Improv is all made up, life’s all made up, you know?

These beliefs were found throughout the data. Some managers believed that improvisation was an everyday occurrence; essentially every interaction that was not scripted was thus improvisation. And that accordingly, this was something that was done before the workshop. Though, participants claimed that they did not necessarily call these occurrences “improvisation.” This belief was matched with the idea that it then directly applies to the workplace. For example, Katrina discussed this idea of direct application in our interview: “The improv—it was more of you—you could see how it aligned to our thought processes and things that we do at work.”

Brenda echoed this sentiment and displayed the direct application even further. She even said during the interview that “taking something and going with it” is what both improvisation and being a manager is all about; hence relating these two meanings together. She was one of the branch managers that took a couple of the exercises used in the workshop and brought it back to implement with her staff. This is what she said on the matter:

So, the real part is the team building…with my peers and then new tools to bring into the branch as a fun way to show how it relates. Like we did this in an improv class on comedy, where it wasn’t…anything bank related and look at how much it relates to what we do.

There are a variety of examples in the data that express similar claims about improvisation applying directly to work. However, when I pressed managers to explain further;
specifically when I asked if them if exceptional improvisational skills were all that was needed to be an effective manager, stipulations became involved. For example, Stella commented that:

But, it’s also making sure that you’re building your skill set, so that you are prepared to improvise. You can’t go into an interaction with a member or an interaction with an employee without having any skills and just improvising; so, it’s being able to have that balance of skills and improvisation.

In this quote, Stella claimed that you can never just improvise as a manager; you also need to have “skills.” This belief was matched by other managers who further explained that improvisation was something you do every day, however, you can never just improvise; you need to have other skills in place. Still, there were a couple of other managers who said that they do not improvise every day and it does not necessarily apply to their everyday work or life. Deborah simply commented at one point: “I can’t say that I actually improv every day.” Some specific issues that managers felt improvisation could not handle were disciplinary actions for employees, training employees in more technical skills and topics, that it is not appropriate for formal meetings, and the fact that purely reacting, without much preconceived thought, to employees or members (customers) at work can put you into some difficult and unwanted situations. Overall, some managers made sense of improvisation as beneficially applying to work and life and others made sense of improvisation as not necessarily applying to everyday work situations.

However, while managers developed meanings of improvisation that encompassed whether or not it applies to their work; more practically speaking, managers did claim that they physically conducted some of the exercises done at the workshop with their employees in their
branches. This implies then that these exercises would somehow benefit themselves or their employees. These tangible and applicative takeaways they talked about include ‘lessons’ that they brought back to their own employees. These include “yes and…” , the importance of saving others, helping to build up both their own and employee confidence, and pushing themselves and their employees to stretch out of their comfort zone. One manager even claimed that the workshop instigated a shift in perspective, by noticing that some of her more introverted employees may be more outgoing if given the chance and were slightly nudged out of their comfort zone; very similar to what happened in the workshop with some of the more introverted branch managers.

There were even more exercises that branch manager said they brought back to work. These included activities such as the “name game”, word association, and “strangely speaking”. The “name game” was an icebreaker that Colin facilitated for the whole group that involved breaking up your name into syllables and creating a physical move for each as you recite the corresponding syllable. Word association was also used as a sort of icebreaker. It involves participants “passing” words or sounds to each other while standing in a circle. The corresponding word or sound is simply the first thing that comes to mind when it is passed to you. And “strangely speaking” was briefly described earlier in this paper. Most of the branch managers that mentioned these activities usually adjusted them for their own employees.

One example of this is when Beatrice used the word association game; she shaped the activity to revolve around banking terms to learn how her group of employees felt about certain topics at work. She explained that an example could be an employee saying “checking” and then another employee may say “frustrated” and after the words were passed a few times, the group was able to discuss these sentiments further in order to more fully understand how each
employee felt about whatever topic was being passed around. Therefore, some branch managers talked about being able to directly transfer some of the activities from the workshop to apply to the workplace; implying that the way they made sense of improvisation in the improvisational workshop consisted of tying the skills and lessons back to the workplace and their employees.

However, it is important to note that while managers discussed these connections and practical exercises they made with improvisation and their own work, almost every branch manager claimed that the most significant thing they gained from the workshop was building relationships with their peers. Most of them explained that they get together only once or twice a month for meetings; so getting to know one another better was significant. While this seems like a worthy ‘takeaway’ from the workshop, building relationships is something that may happen in any sort of formal or informal team building activity; it is by no means specific to improvisational workshops. However, when Jacob spoke more on this, he explained that he believed the workshop helped him greatly after a recent promotion in the credit union:

Prior to doing the team building, I have two or three managers that either I talk to daily or at least multiple times a week. We’re kind of like our own little support group for one another…Doing the improv opened that up a lot more and so I got to know other managers…I actually found some of them to be quite funny and quite creative. And through that…through building the trust in the improv, I was able to bring that back to trust them even more here at work. So, I knew that I could trust them there, I could trust them here.

I was able to communicate better with them and start to expand that little group circle which has really paid off now being…a regional manager. Because now
I’m working with six managers directly and having most of them going through that same improv class with me; none of the managers that I had in my tight inner circle are on my team right now. So to have different managers and to learn how to trust them and how they operate, I got most of that from the improv workshop.

Directly after this response, I asked Jacob if he felt that any other sort of team building activity would have led to this beneficial outcome. He responded in this way:

I’m sure that there would be other ways to do it. But in that kind of setting and in that kind of time period…it was really engaging and it was really effective. You know, I might be able to go do an afterhours or go do a dinner or [Jeff’s] Christmas party and see people like that, but it wouldn’t be as engaging as the improv was. And it might take…multiple times with those other people, where the improv was one afternoon and in that afternoon we were able to really get to know everyone really quickly and be really engaged with one another.

Jacob explained that through a strong sense of engagement and the workshop’s effectiveness in achieving this within one session was what set apart improvisational workshops from other team building activities. And also something that has made his promotion go that much smoother. Overall, most of the managers claimed that there were takeaways for them to apply to their work; whether they were more directly applicative or not varied from manager to manager. However, most of these applications of improvisational activities conducted in the branches occurred only during the first few weeks or so after the workshop and basically stopped altogether afterwards. Overall, there were some benefits that managers claimed to experience that were directly from the workshop. These mostly consisted of reproducing the activities in the
workshop back at work with their employees. Though, most branch managers claimed that the largest gain from the workshop was building relationships with one another. However, while Jacob’s response is insightful, these general takeaways may also occur in other team building or experiential learning workshops.

To summarize, this study focused on three different research questions centering on participant’s sensemaking of an improvisational workshop. I focused on sensemaking because it provides a helpful theoretical lens to understand how people figure out new or unknown situations. Accordingly, none of the managers that attended the workshop had ever attended one before. Therefore, the facilitator is explaining the new concept of improvisation and participants are attempting to make sense about what it means and how it applies to their work. The first research question found that branch managers did not collectively agree that improvisational workshops were any different than other forms of experiential learning or team building. More specifically, some believed that the improvisational workshop was inherently different and offered unique lessons; while others believed that the improvisational workshop was no different than any other form of formal or informal team building activity. In response to the second research question the data revealed several inconsistent or discrepant responses from managers. More specifically, participants made sense of improvisation in many different (and sometimes competing) ways. These included (1) making sense of improvisation as reactive versus proactive; (2) the language of “the improv” versus “improv” or improvisation as an object versus a process; (3) improvisation as natural versus unnatural; and (4) being onstage or performing versus showcasing an “authentic self.” And the third and final research question focused on how participants talked about relating improvisation to their own work. Some managers believed that improvisation as learned in the workshop was applicable to their own work they do every day;
while others did not believe that it did. As a whole, these findings reveal important aspects of sensemaking from a group of people attempting to figure out a new and unknown situation and way of communicating. In the following section, I will discuss how examining these findings from a sensemaking perspective offer new insights to enhance our understanding of improvisational workshops.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study focused on how participants made sense of improvisation as a result from an improvisational workshop and how they related this back to their work. This is in order to understand the nuanced nature of these workshops and to address the inconsistent notions in the literature on improvisation and improvisational workshops along with the complications of ‘packaged’ artistic forms. The findings of this study showed manager’s responses were fairly different from one another and in some cases, inconsistent with the literature in how they made sense of improvisation from the improvisational workshop. However, these discrepant responses can actually provide insight to enhance our understanding of improvisational workshops by looking at them through the perspective of sensemaking. In particular, Weick’s (1995) notion of plausibility being favored over accuracy is a valuable way to understand what happened in this workshop as managers made sense of their first experience of improvisation. This framing is in line with Eisenberg’s (2006) rationalization of utilizing sensemaking in communication research; he writes that communication scholars “select key concepts from the sensemaking model and use them to generate new insights” (p. 1699) in order to shed light on organizational and communication phenomena. Therefore, I identify the concept of plausibility in order to guide the discussion of the findings in this investigation. I chose plausibility because while participants’ responses may have been inaccurate with the literature and the facilitator, they applied these meanings to their own work and thus created plausible meanings of what improvisation meant to them.
As discussed above, one of the seven components of sensemaking that Weick (1995) writes on is that sensemaking is driven by plausibility over accuracy. In other words, sensemaking is not just about getting a meaning ‘right’. Instead, individuals (re)create stories that help them make sense of an unknown or new situation or object. As Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) explain, these stories may be created in part from whatever remains attractive, interesting, or goal-related about the situation. Furthermore, the line of argument from Weick (1995) is that the action taken from a plausible story may still be beneficial to the situation regardless of whether or not the perception is accurate. Therefore, it is this plausible story of a new or unknown situation that is more important, not necessarily how accurate it is. Therefore, by looking at the findings in this light, the responses would indicate that while some of the manager’s perceptions of improvisation may be inaccurate according to the literature or facilitators; this does not mean that they are not benefiting from their own meaning of improvisation. For example, instead of looking at some of the managers perceptions of improvisation being proactive as wrong; instead, it is part of their story that remains plausible and they relate their plausible story to their own work, though it may not be accurate. Therefore, in this section, I will further discuss the findings of this study in light of the notion of plausibility being favored over accuracy in sensemaking.

Weick’s Notion of Plausibility over Accuracy

In the first research question, managers responded in roughly two different ways. Some managers made sense of the improvisational workshop as different from other forms of experiential learning or team building; while others made sense of the improvisational workshop as the same. This is mostly due to how participants talked about what improvisation meant and what it provided for them. For instance, managers who saw the improvisational workshop as
different usually commented about how improvisation tied to how they work. In other words, these managers spoke highly of the applicability of improvisation at their credit union. Other managers that saw the improvisational workshop as the same claimed that the workshop only lead to the building of relationships among their peers; which is something that can happen in any sort of experiential learning or team building activity. In addition to this, there is evidence of the sensemaking process occurring through Brenda and Jeff’s varying meanings of what improvisational workshops were. This is through their process of providing fairly contradictory meanings and attempting to reduce equivocality within these meaning. Brenda especially finds herself shifting from (re)creating improvisational workshops as the same or different. This speaks to Weick’s (1995) notion of individuals constantly attempting to reduce equivocality of whatever meanings they hold. And that instead of a lack of meanings to choose from; the ‘problem’ is usually the large amounts of meanings that people have to constantly and retrospectively sift through. Brenda went through this process during the interview and landed on the conclusion that “you’ll get out what you put in”; regardless of the activity.

Other meanings that managers created were based on the lessons or skills that were discussed and implemented in the workshop; though managers made sense of improvisation in different ways relating to their own work. This resulted in several different (and sometimes competing) ways that managers made sense of improvisation. Many of the responses were inconsistent with one another and in some cases, inconsistent with the literature or the facilitator. For example, some managers saw improvisation as proactive. This is contrary to the literature and the teachings of the workshop. According to both scholars and practitioners, being proactive in improvisation (i.e. guessing what your improvisational partner is going to say) is seen as
disrupting the process of improvisation; put simply, you are no longer improvising (Weick, 1998).

However, participants who contributed to this sense of improvisation as being proactive saw this concept as applying to their own work and thus being beneficial. So while some facilitators and scholars may disagree with this definition of improvisation, the managers who saw improvisation as both proactive and reactive talked about being able to connect and utilize this skill at work in a productive way. In general, their plausible story was that improvisation was reactive and proactive. And this instance of a ‘story’ is what the meaning of improvisation was to them, how it related back to their work, and what they reported back to me. These managers were able to create meaning that may not necessarily be accurate (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), but nonetheless, they claimed that this aspect of improvisation was beneficial to how they work. This remains true for several other responses from managers as discussed in the second research question including improvisation as an object or process, as natural or unnatural, and as performance or producing an “authentic self.” Within these created meanings of improvisation; managers made sense of improvisation in different ways that may have not been accurate; but were plausible and connected to how they work. In addition, there were examples of manager’s meanings of improvisation and managerial roles being tied together. Thus, creating meaning by relating improvisation to their work. This is best represented by Jacob and Brenda. For example, Brenda explicitly tied improvisation and managerial roles by saying that they involve the same skills and premises: “taking something and going with it” is what both improvisation and being a manager means to her. The managers that tied their meaning of improvisation as a result from the workshop to their meaning of what their work entails were the ones that claimed they benefited the most from the workshop. In other words, by relating their understanding of
improvisation to their role as a manager, they were able to create a meaning of improvisation that related directly to how they work.

In addition, these inconsistent responses from managers do not necessarily mean they have to choose one side or the other. Like in the previous example, some managers made sense of improvisation as being both proactive and reactive. This concept of two or more ‘conflicting’ meanings being held or wrestled with by sense-makers is something that is discussed within sensemaking theories. Firstly, remember that sensemaking is retrospective; everything that is ‘made sense of’ is in retrospect. Therefore, many different things affect how individuals make sense of a given situation or object (Weick, 1995). In this study then, individuals constantly made sense retrospectively during and after the workshop in addition to the fact that the managers were called to make sense retrospectively in the long term (roughly four to five months afterwards) within the interviews I conducted. Due to this retrospective nature of sensemaking, as Weick (1995) writes,

> Because people typically have more than one project under way, and have differing awareness of these projects, reflection is over-determined and clarity is not assured. Instead, the elapsed experience appears to be equivocal, not because it makes no sense at all, but because it makes many different kinds of sense. And some of those kinds of sense may contradict other kinds (p. 27).

Through this process, individuals attempt to synthesize these multiple meanings (Weick, 1995). Thus, there may be many different meanings that may contradict one another during the sensemaking process; as was the case with Brenda. Also, Weick (1995) is careful to stress that sensemaking is not contingent on shared meanings. Shared meanings are not what are crucial for
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action; instead it is the experience of the action that is shared (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992); in this case, the experience of the improvisational workshop is more important than the attempting to create shared meanings of improvisation shared by the managers. Therefore, there were many different meanings held by branch managers.

It is important to note, that while these findings utilize sensemaking, they do slightly diverge from more popular applications of the theory. In particular, sensemaking in organizational studies is usually about a group of individuals that are physically working together to make sense of a given situation. And thus, competing or differing meanings of situations may occur between individuals. Though, through Weick’s (1995) plausibility piece, he argues that these different meanings that individuals hold are not incredibly relevant if the group still has plausible stories to take ‘action’. The managers that I observed and interviewed for this project are branch managers of a local credit union; meaning that they run and operate their own branches and do not necessarily work in the same physical space every day. However, they do come together once or twice a month for branch manager meetings to discuss issues and topics collectively. Thus, the idea that I would like to introduce to refer to their sensemaking group is a “distributed community”; where they do not necessarily work in the same space constantly, but nonetheless are a part of the same community and network as branch managers that accordingly communicate with one another on a fairly regular basis. This can be seen as an extension of Weick’s (1976) notion of loosely couple systems. These systems are separate though share similar identities and are made up of interdependent working parts (Orton & Weick, 1990). The reason why this group is an opportunity to extend the concept of loosely couple systems is because the managers share the same occupation in the same company but in distributed branches; therefore, they are physically separated though in communication with one another and
interdependent. In line with the distributed community notion, the larger goal of the improvisational workshop that the managers attended was to introduce and practice improvisation both for themselves but also for their own branches and employees. Some evidence for this was the ‘homework’ that was required after the workshop, to discuss how branch managers would implement lessons from the workshop back at their branches; this is in addition to the amount of times that their own branches and employees came up during the discussion and application sessions after each exercise.

Therefore, the distributed nature of this community of branch managers was what made the workshop “work.” These branch managers did not physically work together so differing or competing meanings of what improvisation was did not seem to cause any issue; therefore managers were free to make sense of the workshop in their own individualized way that they could freely relate to their own employees. Though this idea of a distributed community may slightly diverge from more popular notions of collective sensemaking; it may also be more representative of modern organizational life. With developments in technology, work is becoming more physically distributed (Hinds, 2002); for example, working from home, holding virtual meetings through programs like “Skype”, and participating in work and communication for work over the internet. In addition, it is also common to have groups of individuals that would call themselves a ‘network’ or ‘community’ though they do not necessarily work in the same physical space every day as is the case with the branch managers.

Therefore, this study begins to shed light on the process of individual sensemaking as committed by a distributed community. More specifically, this is seen (1) in the various meanings of improvisation derived from attending the same workshop and how these meanings were ‘brought back’ (or not) to employees, (2) talk on improvisational skills and (re)actions
learned in the workshop being used in the workplace or not, and (3) the group having this event in their retrospective repertoire of how to make sense of improvisation and what they achieved with each other from it (i.e. Jacob and his promotion). Therefore, I theorize that because this community of branch managers was physically distributed, the improvisational workshop still “worked” even though the managers made sense of improvisation in different—though plausible—ways. By “worked” I do not mean that it somehow “fixed” problems back in the workplace. Instead, I mean that participants were able to relate improvisation back to their own work through their own created meaning of improvisation; which, in many ways was the more simplistic goal of the workshop overall: to have fun and relate the skills back to work.

Furthermore, these different and inconsistent meanings shed light on the nuanced ways that improvisational workshops operate as well as the nuanced ways that people understand improvisation and relate it back to their work. This insight may be fruitful for future research on improvisational workshops to explore. More specifically, the nuanced nature and how participants made sense of improvisation in different and sometimes inaccurate ways (according to the literature or facilitator). In addition, this finding indicates that the literature on improvisation as a concept and improvisation as a workshop is in need of further research in order to reconcile these differences. Or perhaps, to view improvisation less as a ‘pure’ and ‘holistic’ art form and more as an individualized and subjective art form that participants relate back to their own way of work would prove more realistic to how participants really make sense of improvisational workshops. In the next section, I will turn to the implications for research and practice.
Implications for Research and Practice

This study contributes to the body of literature on organizational communication, improvisation, and sensemaking. Firstly, this study adds to the knowledge of a real-world phenomenon that businesses are experiencing. Improvisational workshops are becoming a new and popular way to attempt to achieve certain skills and goals outside of work (Corsun et al., 2006). It claims to remain different from other forms of experiential learning due to its importance in organizing through organizational improvisation (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary for studies to further explore what these workshops are offering and creating for businesses. In addition, these workshops are instances of group communication and by further understanding these workshops; researchers can further investigate the processes and effects of group communication during and after these workshops.

Secondly, this project contributes to the body of work on improvisation. It adds a more in-depth and nuanced perspective to the lack of literature (Vera & Crossan, 2005) on improvisational workshops; which is not only a practical contribution, but can also aid in further developing improvisation’s transferability to the workplace. By examining participants’ ‘voices’ in how they make sense of improvisational workshops through qualitative means, this study further explored the nuanced nature of improvisational workshops and what their value is to participants and the workplace. Also the qualitative nature of this project contributes to the more quantitative body of literature on improvisational workshops. Most research on these workshops has been quantitative and outcome-driven. This seems to be out of line with the premise of improvisation being more of a process whose outcomes cannot be measured or predicted. More qualitative research on improvisation and improvisational workshops could prove beneficial in producing a more complete picture on the matter. Additionally, this study problematizes the
contrasts in the literature on improvisation and improvisational workshops. The more mechanistic, monolithic, and descriptive nature of the literature on improvisational workshops seems to constrain improvisation in a way that does not ring true to the more fluid, paradoxical, multi-faceted, creative, and intuitive nature it has. Accordingly, this study calls for more research to reconcile how improvisation is written about versus how improvisational workshops are written about. Or to begin to frame improvisation less as a ‘pure’ and ‘holistic’ art form and more as a subjective and individualized art form; this is due to the differing and sometimes inaccurate meanings of improvisation held by participants.

Another contribution this study has is in the realm of sensemaking and plausibility. Sensemaking is a popular theory among many scholars; especially organizational communication scholars. This study focused on fleshing out how participants made sense of improvisation from attending an improvisational workshop. The lens of plausibility was used in order to make sense of the multiple meanings of what improvisation was to branch managers. Though, this study observed and interviewed branch managers that do not necessarily work in the same space every day. Therefore, I introduce the phrase “distributed community” as an extension of Weick’s (1976) loosely coupled systems to refer to this group; a concept that seems to be growing in modern organizations. Furthermore, this study begins to scratch the surface of how a community that embodies a distributed nature makes sense of events or situations that occurred collectively; though, is retrospectively made sense of individually at different sites; and the fact that these meanings only need to be plausible (by relating these meanings to their work) in order to be beneficial for managers. The study concludes with the fact that differing created meanings through the same event still “works” in a distributed community. This is a unique contribution to
the existing body of research on improvisational workshops because it focuses on a specific
group of participants that begins to reveal the nuanced quality of these workshops.

More practically, it is important to note that while some participants made sense of
improvisation as being applicable and beneficial to their work, this may not have been physically
acted out in their work for the long-term. For example, managers that utilized improvisational
exercises with their own employees stopped doing so a few weeks after the workshop. Therefore,
with just one workshop that focused more so on having fun; according to the interviews, these
improvisational aspects were not necessarily transferred permanently to the participants and their
branches. This leads me to the limitations of this study and possibilities for future research.

**Limitations and Future Research**

There are a couple of limitations to this study. The largest being the relatively limited
amount of data that I was able to collect\(^3\). Though, while the data was limited, I did manage to
achieve a fairly comprehensive look at this workshop and the people involved. While I was not
able to interview every manager that attended the workshop, due to high turnover rates and busy
schedules; I was able to interview most of them. Additionally, the workshop I was able to attend
was a standalone session. Being able to observe a series of workshops with the same participants
would provide even further insight into how participants make sense of improvisational
workshops. This may also provide further insight into the learning process of organizational
improvisation in general. In any case, there are many opportunities for future research.

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\(^3\) Unfortunately, I was unable to attend more workshops due to the Metropolitan Theater not receiving any more
business for workshops. And due to the time restraints of this thesis project, I could not wait to attend more in the
future.
In these possible future studies, it would be worthwhile to investigate a series of several in-depth workshops that are attended by a group somehow working on a specific project or goal to achieve in the workplace. For instance, some improvisational workshop clients are collaborative groups of individuals who are attempting to get ‘unstuck’ or more creative in their project’s endeavors. Investigating a series of workshops like this could further demonstrate how participants make sense of improvisation in relation to a specific project they are working on. Another possibility for future research may be utilizing a comparative case study method to compare two improvisational troupes or facilitator’s workshops. The ideology and philosophy of improvisation varies from troupe to troupe and facilitator to facilitator. Therefore, examining and comparing the nuanced nature of different workshops from different sites could prove useful in further understanding the nature of these workshops and correspondingly, how participants make sense of improvisational workshops. Additionally, the difference in meanings held by participants indicate that further research is needed in order to reconcile the difference between improvisational workshops, improvisational concepts, and improvisational workshop literature. Or perhaps frame improvisation as a concept in a way that embraces the more individualized and plausible nature of how participants make sense of improvisation. Finally, it would be beneficial to conduct further research on this concept of distributed communities and how they individually make sense ‘collectively’. While they may not work together constantly, they do reflect a shift in workplace environments, and can shed further light on how a community that is distributed makes sense of certain situations or objects.
CONCLUSION

This study adopted a grounded and inductive approach to explore how participants made sense of improvisation as a result from improvisational workshops and accordingly, how they related this back to their work. This exploration was instigated from the inconsistent notions in the literature on improvisation versus improvisational workshops in addition to the complications or compromises that arise when artistic endeavors are packaged to sell. And in general to further understand the nuanced nature of these workshops. In addition, I concluded that these issues are best looked at through sensemaking due to the new and unknown situation and the variety of possible meanings that could surface.

I sought to investigate if participants believed that improvisational workshops were different from other forms of experiential learning, how participants made sense of improvisation in the workshop, and how they talked about relating improvisation back to the workplace. This study found that these responses did not coalesce into succinct categories of what improvisation is and what it can do. Even though all of the participants attended the same workshop, some responses were inconsistent with one another and in some cases, inconsistent with the literature and teachings from the workshop. By looking at the inconsistent notions in the literature on improvisation and improvisational workshops; I conclude that more research or a sort of re-framing needs to be done in order to reconcile the discrepancies between the two.

Lastly, the findings of the study were investigated through the lens of sensemaking; more specifically the fact that plausibility drives sensemaking, not accuracy. Therefore, the managers’ inaccurate meaning of improvisation does not mean they were ‘wrong’. Instead, managers (re)created stories that were plausible and related to their work. In addition, these inconsistent
and different meanings between the managers were not as much as an issue because they were a
distributed community of branch managers; meaning that while they may be physically separated
in day-to-day work, they still communicate and work together as a community. Therefore, due to
the distributed nature of this group, the different meanings held by the branch managers were not
as problematic and the workshop still “worked” because the participants were able to create
plausible meanings of improvisation retrospectively while physically a part and could relate
these skills back to their work.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


INTRODUCTION

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR BRANCH MANAGERS

Intro: My name is Laurel—I’m a graduate student at CU Boulder studying improvisation in the workplace. All of your answers will be confidential—if any of your responses are used it will be under a pseudonym names. Did you glance over the IRB consent form? Do you verbally consent? Thank you.

Questions:

1. Before the workshop, did you know what improvisation was? Did the workshop change your perception of improvisation at all?
2. How would you define improvisation in your own words?
   a. Do you feel that this definition has been influenced by the workshop attended in October? Or was this your definition before the workshop?
3. Do you and your employees/other managers get together for other ‘teambuilding’ activities or exercises (such as happy hours, picnics, hikes, etc.)?
   a. If so, how do you feel Bovine’s improvisational workshop differed (if at all) from these activities?
   b. Have you ever done improvisational workshops before the one at Bovine?
4. During the workshop, did you feel that these improvisational ‘principles’ or ‘tips’ could be applied to the workplace?
   a. Reflecting back, do you feel that you were participating in ‘improvisational acts’ at work before the workshop? Perhaps unknowingly?
      i. Have your acts/reactions in the workplace changed at all post-workshop in relation to improvisation?
5. After the workshop, did you put into place any of these improvisational ‘principles’ or ‘tips’ in your work?
   a. Do you have any examples?
   b. Do you feel that improvisation and your own work can work well together? In other words, can improvisation speak to or aid in your work process at all?
6. What was the biggest thing that stuck out to you from the workshop—something that you remember vividly now, roughly 4 months later?
7. Is there anything you feel improvisation cannot do in the workplace?

Closing: Thank you so much for your time!