

PSYC 255: Psychology of Improvisation

Evan D. Bradley, Instructor

Spring 2013, Lawrence University



1 Basics

1.1 Class

day TR

time 12:30pm–2:30pm

place Briggs Hall #422

www <http://moodle.lawrence.edu/course/view.php?id=5719>

1.2 Instructor

email evan.d.bradley@lawrence.edu

phone 920.832.7396

office Briggs Hall #322

hours TR 2:30–3:30pm, or by appointment

2 Course

2.1 Overview

This course explores the creative process by examining improvised performance in music, theater, and other art forms, and the improvisational nature of everyday behaviors, including language. Individual, social, developmental, and educational aspects of improvisation will be considered through readings in psychological and performance literature, along with viewing, listening, and participating in performances.

2.2 Objectives

2.2.1 Learning Goals

1. identify characteristics of individual and group improvised performance found across genres;
2. describe cognitive, biological, and sociological capacities (*e.g.*, perception, memory, learning) important for improvised performance behaviors;
3. explain, compare, and evaluate cognitive theories related to improvisational behaviors.

What this course *isn't*: This isn't a course in improvisation—we won't be learning or practicing any techniques, although we may engage in some improv games for illustrative purposes (and fun!). However, if you are a musician/actor/performer, I hope that what you learn in the course may eventually be applicable to your own art in some way.

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2.2.2 Academic Goals

In addition to acquiring specific points of knowledge, it is my hope that by participating in the course, you will improve your academic skills in a number of areas which will benefit you in your future studies. After taking this course, you should improve your ability to:

1. read primary research literature and interpret the results of experiments;
2. synthesize multiple sources of information into a coherent view of a topic;
3. conduct collaborative research and writing;
4. communicate scientific information to others effectively using a variety of media;
5. apply scientific reasoning to social/behavioral phenomena.

2.3 Materials

There is no textbook for the course. Readings will include book chapters and scientific journal articles, and we will also view/listen to multimedia sources. All materials will be provided to you in class or electronically, or placed on reserve at the library. See the course schedule for preliminary assignments.

2.4 Assignments

Below is an overview of the types of assignments you will complete; specific instructions for each assignment will be provided as they are assigned.

2.4.1 Classwork

Discussion/Participation Class discussion is at the heart of the course, and we will all get the most out of the course by participating fully. You are not being evaluated on the *quantity*, but on the *quality* of your contributions to the class. This involves not only stating your opinion, but listening to others and responding thoughtfully and respectfully. My role in these discussions is to facilitate participation by the whole class; remember that you are not speaking just to me, but participating in a cooperative exercise along with everyone else.

Discussion Leading Periodically, individuals or small groups will be assigned to lead the discussion for the class. This involves planning discussion-starting questions, and can even include assigning “homework” to your classmates. You should be excited about this, because it means you get more say over what we talk about! I will discuss details of the discussion for each assignment.

Other In-Class Assignments Individual and small-group activities, such as mini-presentations and short writings, will be assigned spontaneously to enhance lessons. These may be collected, evaluated, and returned in order to assess your progress.

2.4.2 Homework

Homework assignments will be assigned regularly. The goal of these assignments is to help you prepare for and/or reflect on what happens in class. Some types of homework which may be assigned include answering or creating discussion questions, and finding or preparing an example for discussion.

Reading/Discussion Questions The most frequent homework assignment you will complete will be formulating discussion questions you would like the rest of the class to consider based on the readings for the day’s class. For some readings, you will be asked to respond to questions from the instructor or discussion leader(s). We will discuss in class how to formulate a productive discussion question. Such assignments should be completed before 9am on the day of the class to which they pertain.

Homework Notes:

- Usually you will submit homework assignments via the website; sometimes I will ask you to bring them to class printed or handwritten. If you handwrite any assignments, please make sure they are **legible!**
- You are encouraged to discuss and work with other students on your assignments, but for individual assignments, you should turn in your own work.
- I may assign other kinds of homework besides those listed here.

2.4.3 Projects

There is no exam for the course. Instead, we will complete two related projects, one with a collaborative emphasis, and one individual.

Class Wiki Project The class will work together to create a wiki-based website detailing psychological research on improvisation. This will include material assigned for the class, and other sources we will work together to collect. Some parts of the wiki will be written collaboratively by the class, and some parts will be written by individuals or small groups.

Annotated Bibliography You will collect your individual contributions to the class project in the form of an annotated bibliography designed to address a specific research question about improvisation. You will collect information from a variety of sources (primary research literature, reference material, multimedia, etc.), and incorporate it into a coherent overview of your topic. There will be multiple individual components of the project, including a topic proposal and a presentation to the class.

2.5 Field Trips

A proposed trip to an academic conference focusing on the psychology and neuroscience of improvisation is currently in the planning stages. We are also tentatively scheduled to visit Björklunden May 24–26. In addition to these major trips, we will likely make some excursions around campus to observe rehearsals or performances of various groups. Details of these trips, and assignments associated with them, will be determined. If these occur outside of regular class time, appropriate accommodations will be made for make-up work or alternative assignments.

2.6 Grades

Assignment Weighting

Each assignment carries a different weight in determining your overall grade:

category	assignment	
project	wiki	30%
	annotated bib	20%
homework		30%
classwork	participation	10%
	other	10%

Grading Scheme

Your grade for the course will be determined based on a hybrid norm- and criterion-referenced grading scheme. *Criterion* refers to the fact that should you achieve a certain score, you will earn a corresponding grade (see the table below); *norm* refers to the fact that I take the class distribution of scores into account when assigning grades.

score \geq	grade \geq
93%	A
90%	–
87%	+
83%	B
80%	–
77%	+
73%	C
70%	–
67%	+
63%	D
60%	–

This is not grading ‘on a curve’ *per se*, in that it is possible for everyone in the class to get an A, or for everyone to get a C; this simply means that I may adjust the cutoffs for each letter grade at my discretion, depending on the overall distribution of scores. I will only adjust these cutoffs downward—that is, you are guaranteed to receive a grade at least as high as that listed in the table corresponding to your score, but you may receive a higher grade. I also take individual improvement over the course of the semester into account.

Grade Appeals

I am human, and I do make mistakes when grading assignments. If you feel we’ve made a mistake, or been unfair in grading your work, or if you’d just like further explanation so that you can improve your work, please speak to me; be prepared to justify your appeal.

Grade cutoffs and improvement adjustments are not subject to appeal!

Missed/Late Work

It is important to stay up-to-date with readings and assignments. I have done my best to design the course to be flexible and manageable, but with the schedule mostly set by design, it is easy to fall behind quickly. Please let me know early on if you are having trouble with any particular assignment, or the workload in general. You must complete all assigned work in a timely fashion in order to receive full credit; homework assignments will be penalized 5% (a half-letter grade) for each 24 hours late. Outstanding assignments at the end of the term will receive a zero.

3 Policies

3.1 Attendance

Attendance is **required**. That said, I will not record attendance, nor assign any part of your grade just for showing up; however, your understanding of course concepts will surely suffer due to poor attendance, and you will miss the chance to participate in discussion and other graded activities. If you miss class, please contact me, and your classmates, as soon as possible to find out what you’ve missed. Makeup opportunities for in-class work (if possible) will be permitted at my discretion for **approved absences only** (documentation may be required).

If you know you are going to miss class, it is better to speak to me beforehand to make arrangements than to ask for help after missing something important!

3.2 Academic Integrity

Academic honesty is of the utmost importance in the academic world. Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses, and ignorance is no excuse; therefore I urge you to become familiar with the University’s Honor Code, found at http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/student_acad/honor_council/; We will discuss this in class, but I encourage you to seek my advice if you are unclear about any part of this policy.

3.3 Academic Accommodations

I am happy to make accommodations for students with disabilities in accordance with University guidelines. Any student who thinks he/she may need an accommodation based on a disability should speak to me, and contact the Student Academic Services office as soon as possible. Their office is located on the first floor of Briggs Hall, and can be reached at 920.832.6530; more information is available at https://www.lawrence.edu/dept/student_acad/.

3.4 Instructor Availability

The best way to get in touch with me outside of class is by email. My usual policy is to answer student emails within 24 hours; I will, however, do my best to answer emails sent before the close of business (usually 5pm) the same day, but I make no guarantees. Of course, you can always ask questions during or after class, or schedule a time to meet in person. Please reserve phone contact for emergencies.

3.5 Classroom Technology

Please silence your cell phone before entering lecture or discussion, and **please refrain from texting during class!** If you experience an emergency requiring you to receive/make a call/text, please be polite and quietly excuse yourself from the classroom before doing so. Laptop computers should be used for note-taking purposes only.

I reserve the right to limit computer use in the classroom if it becomes disruptive to the learning process.

Schedule

Below, you will find the preliminary schedule for the course. **The schedule is subject to changes and additions.** I'll alert you to changes in plans, but please check the course website frequently for updates to readings and assignments.

Please read the assigned material before the day for which it is assigned.

week	day	unit	topics/readings	assignments due
1	T	3/26	<i>administrivia</i>	
	R	3/28	Johnson-Laird (1991)	
2	T	4/2	Sawyer (1992); Berliner (1994, ch.4)	
	R	4/4	Sawyer (1999); Csikszentmihalyi and Rich (1997)	
3	T	4/9	Biasutti and Frezza (2009); Berliner (1994, ch.6)	
	R	4/11	Pressing (1988); Johnson-Laird (2002)	
4	T	4/16	Berkowitz and Ansari (2008); Limb and Braun (2008); de Manzano and Ullén (2012)	
	R	4/18	Magerko et al. (2009); Eisenberg and Thompson (2003)	project topics/groups
5	T	4/23	Sawyer (2006); Sawyer (2003, ch.6)	
	R	4/25	Berliner (1994, ch.13); Sawyer (2003, ch.2); Seddon (2005)	wiki profile
6	T	4/30	Becker (2000); Cash (2000); Sawyer (1997, ch.8); Halpern et al. (1994, ch.4)	
	R	5/2	<i>No Class—Reading Period</i>	wiki outline
7	T	5/7	Berliner (1994, ch.4); McPherson (1993)	
	R	5/9	Burnard (2000); Kratus (1991)	wiki draft #1
8	T	5/14	Baker-Sennett and Matusov (1997); K. S. McKnight and Scruggs (2008, ch.)	bibliography proposal
	R	5/16	Sawyer (2004a, 2004b)	wiki feedback #1
9	T	5/21	Mendonça (2007); Lubet and Hankinson (2006); Hayes-Roth et al. (1995)	
	R	5/23	B. McKnight and Bontis (2002); Yanow (2001)	wiki draft #2
F–S 5/24–26 Björklunden				
10	T	5/28		wiki feedback #2
	R	5/30		bibliography sources
F	M	6/3		Final Wiki
	W	6/5		Final Annotated Bib Course Evaluations

References

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