Improvisation in Choral Settings

by

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Abstract

While improvisation in music education settings is widely endorsed as an approach to music-making, research suggests that improvisation in these settings is not widely practiced. Improvisation is often associated with jazz curricula and certain pedagogies relating to elementary music. Researchers have identified fear, lack of time, and lack of training as key barriers to implementing improvisation in several music education contexts, including elementary, general music, band, and jazz ensemble settings. Little research exists, however, with regards to the use of improvisation in choral settings at the secondary school and university levels.

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of improvisation in choral settings. Using a case study methodology, I collected and categorized data comprising observations and semi-structured interviews of three choral educators in North America, two at the university level, and one at the high school level, who utilize improvisation with their students. The results of the data yielded several findings related to improvisation strategies, facilitating improvisation, defining success in these contexts, as well as rationales for and perceived benefits of using improvisation.
The findings of the study will provide choral educators wishing to utilize improvisation with their students a number of improvisation strategies, as well as suggestions for facilitating improvisation that will mitigate typical reservations related to its implementation. The results of this study also suggest that improvisation can counter common criticisms of traditional choral settings, while at the same time, provide opportunities to enhance and transform choral music-making for students and educators alike.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview

Musical improvisation, the act of creating new music in the moment of performance, is perhaps one of the most underutilized forms of music-making in music education settings, despite its widespread educational appeal. This real-time form of musical innovation invites students on both individual and corporate levels to move beyond notational boundaries to demonstrate, express, and further develop their unique understandings of music and music-making. This study documents the ways in which three choral educators use improvisation with their choral students to realize these above-mentioned outcomes.

1.2 Background

In 1994, “the predominant music education organization in the United States” (Mark, 1999, p. 80), NAfME (then called MENC) prioritized improvisation as an educational tool by including it in its nine standards for music education. These national standards, while not mandatory, were widely adopted by schools throughout North America, and continue to inform individual state music content standards. With Standard Three, “Improvising melodies, variations and accompaniments” (MENC, 1994, p. vi), came the reasonable expectation that improvisation would be routinely implemented in a variety of music education settings. Noted researcher Patrice Madura (1999) went so far as to make the following prediction: “In all likelihood, the twenty-first century will be one that sees vocal improvisation as a vital musical activity in grades K-12” (p.1). The National Association for Music Education’s (NAfME) subsequent reissuing of the core standards in music education in 2014 lends some credence to Madura’s prediction; improvisation, which is woven throughout the standards matrix, seemingly plays a more integrative role in the music-making process as compared to the 1994 matrix in which improvisation was portrayed as a discrete music-making endeavour. This integrative approach to improvisation in the 2014 standards reflects a departure from the prescribed skills and knowledge outcomes that characterized the 1994 standards towards outcomes that focused on music literacy and conceptual understanding (Fehr, 2014).
1.3 Preparing for Improvisation: Improvisation in School Settings

While the inclusion of improvisation into the 1994 Music Educators’ National Conference (now known as NAfME) music content standards was a landmark for the role of improvisation in music education settings, the use of improvisation in these settings was actually pioneered by Satis N. Coleman (1878-1961) almost a century ago. Encouraged by her experiments with music education in her private studio, Coleman continued to refine her approach to teaching music in the 1920s and 30s that “emphasized singing, improvisation, her own notational system and making simple instruments that students built and then played” (Shevock, 2015, p. 57) at one of the foremost progressive experimental schools at the time (Coleman, 1922, p. 10), The Lincoln School in New York, a laboratory school associated with Columbia University Teachers College.

In the preface to her book *Creative Music for Children* Coleman contended that “To be musical is to feel and enjoy music—to have the impulse that results in the habits of playing and improvisation…” (1922, p. 10). Improvisation played a central role in Coleman’s curriculum (Southcott, 1990). She felt that children should have opportunities to improvise before introducing formalized systems of music notation. Coleman observed, “The pity is that the longing every child has to express himself in music of some sort is smothered in early youth by methods of teaching over his head, difficult systems of notation, and complicated instruments” (Johnston, 1920, p. 28). Elsewhere, Coleman wrote,

Some of the modern teaching systems are excellent, but, as I believe, are not properly placed in the child’s curriculum. They should be preceded by a period of actual “making music” by the child. He should improvise and learn to give intelligent musical expression to his own feelings. Then when he wants to play other things, and is interested to know what other composers say, he will realize the need of understanding notation, and will be glad to learn of it. (1917, p. 50)
Another progressive school, the Pillsbury Foundation School of Santa Barbara, is notable for its contribution to the study of improvisation in music education settings. The Pillsbury School, which began in 1937 and ran until 1948, was supported by a generous endowment from Evans Searle Pillsbury. Leopold Stokowski persuaded the trustees of the Pillsbury endowment to open a school for small children which would foster “spontaneous music-making” in order for teachers to glean how musical creativity may be developed (Wilson, 1981, p. 16). Wilson (1981) further noted that, “Above all, the teachers sought to maintain an environment in which children’s creative play would be stimulated yet unhampered in the free exercise of their imaginations” (p. 18). Two seminal music educators at this school, Douglas Pond and Gladys Moorhead, documented their observations of children making music, resulting in a four-volume study of their findings published in the 1940s and early 1950s (Moorhead & Pond, 1941-1951/1978). Littleton (2015) noted that the Moorhead and Pond studies were “the first comprehensive investigations of children’s spontaneous music making in the context of free play” (p. 32). While Kierstead (1994) asserted that “contemporary investigators of music in early childhood recognize the Pillsbury Foundation School as an important early event in the history of and as a model for early childhood music education in the United States” (p. 218), Wilson (1981) noted that the Pillsbury studies remained largely unnoticed until a subsequent reprinting of these studies in 1978.

Advances proposed by Coleman and Moorhead and Pond represented changes to music education delivery that at the time were uncomfortable for many, at least in North America. Ernst Ferand’s (1940) recognition of this and his advocacy for improvisation in music education settings of the time highlighted this point:

The problem of a creative music education seems to me to be the bridging of the ever-widening gap, first, between active music making and passive listening, and secondly, between composers and performers. This can be achieved by abandoning music education based exclusively on interpretation, on mechanical drill and imitation, or on abstract theory. In any attempt to do this, the knowledge gained from a study of the history of improvisation may be of the greatest value to music educators. Such knowledge may encourage giving more attention to the improvisatory element in singing
as well as in instrumental and ensemble playing, and, above all, it can help to make purely technical and theoretical studies more attractive and interesting. Allowing more opportunity for the individual to create and invent would bring theory and practice closer together, and would win over to a more enduring, livelier music activity (as amateurs) many children and adolescents who are repelled by the monotony of run-of-the-mill technical and theoretical instruction. (Ferand, 1940, p. 125)

Ferand was highly influenced by the teaching of Émile-Jacques Dalcroze, studying with him for two years (1913-1914), and directing the Dalcroze School in Hellerau for several years in the 1920s before immigrating to the United States in 1938. Dalcroze’s beliefs shared some similarity to those of Coleman (1922) and Pond (1980). Chief among them was that music education should embrace the embodiment of music through movement and improvisation (Anderson, 2011).

Thus, it is perhaps understandable that the Dalcroze approach is one avenue through which improvisation is realized in North American music education settings today. Kodály and Orff, two other European derived educational approaches, are now commonly used at the elementary level of music education. Like Dalcroze, they feature improvisation, albeit to varying degrees. Improvisation also figures prominently in instrumental and vocal jazz programs typically offered at junior high and senior high levels.

Notably, all of these approaches to music made inroads in North America in the 20th century. Mark (2008) observed that the Dalcroze method gained footing in many college settings in the 1930s. National organizations dedicated to Orff and Kodály were established in 1963 and 1974, respectively. The establishment of the National Association of Jazz Educators (NAJE) in 1968 helped to legitimize the jazz ensemble as part of music education. During this time and the period of the 70s, the number of jazz ensembles at the secondary schools burgeoned (Elliott, 1985, pp. 18–19). Monkelien noted the rise of vocal jazz programs occurred in the 1970s (2001, p. 88).
1.4 From Inertia to Innovation

Although observations regarding problematic approaches to music education in North America came as early as the 1920s, calls for broader approaches to music education gained critical support in the 1960s. The Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 gave rise to criticisms of the American education system, which, at the time, featured what Pogonowski (2001) described as a “dearth of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation” (p. 25). Music education did not escape such scrutiny:

“It didn’t make any difference where you went, it was almost always the same. Except for very rare instances, music education was a straitjacket where everyone was expected to do, be, think, respond, learn, hear, accept, reject and act in the same way…There were few alternatives to be found. Music education was a closed box in which everything was highly standardized…There was little if any allowance for individual differences in perception or projection of musical thought. In spite of the fact that the vitality of music is derived from the uniqueness of thought of the creative musician, music education had become a monolithic system to program people to uniformity of perception.” (Thomas, 1970, p. 7)

Those are the words of Ronald Thomas, who wrote the final report of the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project (MMCP). These observations of music classrooms in 1965 shaped, in part, the impetus for MMCP. Launched in 1966, MMCP developed objectives that supported a curriculum guide for “focused yet sequential” music activities, in which “discovery” and student-learning was emphasized to promote individual creative capabilities (Thomas, 1970, p. 8). These approaches were based on the writings of cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner, who proposed a “spiral curriculum” in which “any subject could be taught in some intellectually honest form at any stage of development” (Bruner, 1960, quoted in Pogonowski, 2001, p. 25). Bruner believed that students needed direct interaction with musical materials in order to construct meaning (Pogonowski, 2001, p. 25). Perhaps spurred on by “the admission of chance, choice, and improvisation” which appeared in compositions in the sixties, as Pogonowski (2001, p. 24)
intimates, improvisation played a substantial role in the MMCP curriculum: “Whether at first grade or at the college level, improvisation has a value in developing and exercising musical judgement that establishes it as a vital part of the curriculum” (Thomas, 1970, p. 105).

The *Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education* (CMP), established in 1963, promoted similar goals:

1. To increase the emphasis on the creative aspect of music in the public schools.

2. To create a solid foundation or environment in the music education profession for the acceptance, through understanding, of the contemporary music idiom.

3. To reduce the compartmentalization between music composition and music education for the benefit of composers and music educators alike.

4. To cultivate taste and discrimination on the part of music educators and students regarding the quality of contemporary music used in schools.

5. To discover creative talent among students. (D’Arms, Klotman, Werner, & Willoughby, 1973, p. 36)

There were many facets to this project, including seminars where music educators gathered to discuss how the goals stated above could be realized. One tangible offshoot was the establishment of six pilot programs administered mostly in elementary schools that targeted creativity through the use of improvisation and composition (D’Arms et al., 1973). Another initiative of the CMP was *Comprehensive Musicianship*, which was described as “an integrated approach to music study which strives to reduce fragmented learning by providing opportunities for students to see relationships in music, such as the relationship of music theory to literature, scale to melody, and one style to another” (D’Arms et al., 1973, p. 40).

A class in comprehensive musicianship is active and project oriented. The concept assumes that students enjoy learning and accrue lasting benefits when they find that their
work is immediately useful—when they can apply ideas and information through composition, performance, or research. For example, a student can compose or improvise a piece to demonstrate his understanding of a particular concept. (D’Arms et al., 1973, p. 40)

The authors of “CMP in Perspective” draw similar parallels to the goals of the Tanglewood Symposium held in 1967. Described as “the most important education meeting of this period [the 60s]” (Labata & Smith, 1997, p. 35), the Tanglewood Symposium drew educators, foundation administrators, government officials, and corporate leaders to discuss the role of music and music education in American society (p. 35).

This resulted in the Tanglewood Declaration, a statement of eight imperatives of music education, two of which are mentioned here: “Greater emphasis should be placed on helping the individual student to fulfill his needs, goals, and potentials” (Quoted in Mark, 2008, p. 111), and

Music of all periods, styles, forms, and cultures belongs in the curriculum. The musical repertory should be expanded to involve music of our time in its rich variety, including currently popular teenage music and avant-garde music, American folk music, and the music of other cultures. (Mark, 2008, p. 110)

In an effort to realize the imperatives set forth by the Tanglewood Symposium, The Goals and Objectives Project (GO) was established in 1969 by the Music Educators National Conference (MENC), “the organization that serves as leader and spokesman for music education in the United States” (MENC, 1974, p. vii). Mark (1995) notes that “because 20 of the 35 GO Project objectives for the profession pertained to curriculum and instruction, the National Executive Board [of the MENC] created a vehicle to address this central topic” (p. 37). In 1974, the Commission on Instruction, a subgroup of MENC, issued The School Music Program: Description and Standards. This guide to music education curriculum design is informed by ten outcomes that define a “quality music program” (p. 4). While the MENC does not justify the
order in which these outcomes are organized, improvisation appears as the second outcome, suggesting a certain degree of prioritization. According to the MENC:

The musically educated person:

1. is able to make music alone and with others.
2. is able to improvise and create music.
3. is able to use the vocabulary and notation of music.
4. is able to respond to music aesthetically, intellectually, and emotionally.
5. is acquainted with a wide variety of music, including diverse musical styles and genres.
6. is familiar with the role music has played and continues to play in the life of man [sic].
7. is able to make aesthetic judgements based on critical listening and analysis.
8. has developed a commitment to music.
9. supports and encourages others to support the musical life of a community.
10. is able to continue his [sic] musical learning independently. (pp. 4-5)

A second edition was issued in 1986, essentially laying the groundwork for the National Standards for Arts Education from which music content standards were derived (Mark, 1999, p. 89). The inclusion of improvisation in the music content standards published in 1994, as well as those published in 2014 by NAfME (MENC) indicates a renewed desire to include improvisation in music education settings.

In summary, explorations with improvisation and music education carried out by Satis Coleman, Douglas Pond, and Gladys Moorhead in the first half of the 20th century seemingly foreshadowed those in the second half of the century. In particular, three key educational initiatives to have
emerged from the 1960s—the Tanglewood Symposium, the Contemporary Music Project, and the Manhattanville Music Curriculum Project—underscored a student-centered approach to musical creativity based on discovery and inclusivity in music education, ostensibly setting the stage for activities such as composition and improvisation to take root in music classrooms across North America.

1.5 Improvisation and the Performance-Pedagogy Paradox

Just as in European art music of the twentieth century, creation and re-creation have become separated (and almost unrelated) processes, so in education the pursuit of technical perfection has all but supplanted the development of spontaneous invention. (Peggie, 1985, p. 169)

Calls for a broader offering in music education alluded to in the previous section have seemingly been unheeded, leaving little room for improvisation in music classrooms, as Peggie’s comments above suggest. As Pignato (2010) explains,

For much of the past century, efforts to include improvisation in American school music contexts have been framed by discrepancies between product-conducive modes of teaching, which emphasize musical literacy and standardized achievement, and process conducive modes of learning, which emphasize student agency, exploration, and discovery. Much of American music education has emphasized the former. (p. 1)

Pignato’s quote is not only noteworthy for the distinction he makes between “product-conducive” and “process-conducive,” but by his use of “teaching” and “learning” respectively to denote teacher-directed versus student-centred approaches.

Bartel (2004b) echoes Pignato’s observations. He notes that “the music education paradigm may be best characterized by the rehearsal model...Music education today is perhaps more teacher directed than any other aspect of schooling” (p. xii). Additionally, Bartel (2004b) notes “there is
no doubt that the most dominant aspect of what we teach is replication of existing music prescriptions—i.e., learning to read and perform music created by someone else” (p. xiv). In the scenario Bartel has outlined, as with Pignato’s assessment, there is little room for other types of musical experiences such as improvisation.

Several music educators have highlighted the limitations of the rehearsal-model approach to music education. Shively (2004) implies that the large ensemble approach offers a narrow view of the goals and aims of music education. He advocates that we look beyond what is often the singular focus of preparing performances based on the musical decisions made by teacher-conductors toward a more comprehensive approach to music education that leads to performances that reflect musical understanding on the part of individual students and the ensembles as a whole. (p. 180)

Hickey’s (1997) views on large ensemble-based music education echo the monothetic view of music education that was criticized by Thomas in his final report of MMCP: “…the prominent teaching objective throughout the history of performance music education has been to get students to play ‘by the numbers’ and to ‘stay in the lines’—to play according to what appears on the written page” (Hickey, 1997, p. 17).

Reimer (2000) argues that such a narrow focus on performance does little to equip students with skills and interpretive tools: “students…are not being given the opportunity to develop individuality and responsibility to be an artist” (p. 12). Elsewhere he asserts, “Students…can become very proficient at being able to do what they are told, but are left with minimal ability to make musical decisions when left to their own devices” (p. 12).
This “rehearsal model” approach to music-making, however, seems to have led one of the participants in Pignato’s (2010) study of teachers who used improvisation, to adopt improvisation into her teaching practices:

Her impatience, coupled with the urgent conviction that following “the traditional music education path that everybody’s on”…was no longer adequate and could, in fact, be detrimental to her students. She came home from work, tormented by the fear that she might be a musical killjoy “robbing her students of the joy of music-making.” (p. 115)

Likewise, Hirschorn (2011) recalls observations of his own teaching in the choral setting that prompted him to explore improvisation with his students:

As the choral teacher, I selected music, error-detected, told students what I was hearing, and suggested ways for errors to be fixed. This form of instruction left very little student input. My obsession with establishing a high-quality performance level left no time to get to know my students as individual students with creative potential. Over time, I observed less and less student engagement, interest, and motivation. (p. 7)

These comments support Bartel’s (2004a) argument that the rehearsal/performance model is exclusionary; students without prior musical training often will have trouble accessing performance-based ensembles at junior and senior high levels (p. 233). Similarly, one of the distinguishing features of a performance-based model is the lack of entry points for students to participate in these ensembles. If you have not had prior experience with the exact type of ensemble, it will be difficult to start. Bartel (2004a) notes, “Even choral programs are intimidating to students who lack experience with music, who are not fully inducted into the style of western art music [sic], or who have not sung through the middle years” (p. 233). A dominant focus on Western European music may also alienate those students for whom this canon of repertoire does not reflect personal and cultural backgrounds (Bartel, 2004a, p. 233; Sarath, 1993, p. 24).
Similarly, music educator Patrick Freer (2011) wonders if choral educators have ensnared themselves in a “self-imposed trap” (p. 173) by fostering elite choirs that only serve a small population of the school. These high-level performance choirs, he notes, are often featured at national choral conferences which tend to reinforce and perpetuate this aesthetic ideal: “Have we established a caste system within the ranks of music educators where choral teachers who conduct an elite cadre of meticulously trained musicians are held in higher regard than those who teach/conduct a more general population of students?” (p. 173).

A further barrier to the rehearsal model is the reliance on the notated score. Sawyer (1999) suggests that notation may be a hindrance in music programs. He asserts, “Perhaps by teaching improvisation first, we could even open the door to a larger number of students, since the tediousness of learning notation is a barrier that causes many students to drop aside” (p. 204).

Kratus (2007) draws our attention to the long-term effects of perpetuating the rehearsal-model. He points to surveys in America and Canada that reveal declining enrollment patterns in music programs within public schools. While he concedes that a lack of funding is a likely contributor to this disturbing trend, another contributing factor, he argues, is the way in which music education is delivered—it is out of sync with prevailing cultural currents and individualistic ways in which music is consumed:

Not only have in-school music experiences become disassociated from out-of-school music experiences, but tried-and-true music education practices have become unmoored from educational practices used in other disciplines. The teaching model most emulated in secondary ensembles is that of the autocratic, professional conductor of a large, classical ensemble. Is that the model of music making we want for our students? (pp. 45-46)

Fiske (2000) shares the concern that large ensembles such as orchestra and band may not survive. His perspective is informed, in part, by his belief that “music at the high school level has
in the past 40 years become increasingly insular and isolated from the music community, both popular and serious.” (p. 292). Taking direct aim at secondary band programs, he calls for “greater individual musical understanding,” (p. 292) and a revitalization of this setting which sees a move away from the valorization of technical aspects of playing music.

Reimer (2000) is also troubled by the long-term ramifications of such a heavy emphasis of performance in music education: “What happens to the students who have undergone such experiences once they graduate from high school?” (p. 13). Resonant with this, Snow and Apfelstadt (2002) outline a scenario in which high school choral students develop proficiency in recreating music without the acquisition of skills needed to participate in an advanced choir after high school. They ask: “Who is to blame here? The student, the college director, or the high school teacher who made the singers dependent upon his or her teaching and discouraged, even prevented, the development of musical independence?” (p. 208).

Elsewhere, Reimer (2000) asks, “What will be the residue of musical understanding [students] have gained from performing, and will it be sufficient for, and relevant to, an enhanced ability to incorporate music into their lives as a precious source of pleasure?” (p.13). Zenker (2004) echoes these sentiments. She is critical of the large ensemble-based music classes and suggests that the emphasis on “perfection in performance” (p. 121) does not prepare students to be lifelong music learners:

How does the musical experience of playing third trombone for years in the high school band realistically prepare a student for continuing musical engagement and enrichment throughout her life? Similarly, how does a private piano student’s completion of the grade eight Toronto Royal Conservatory of Music piano examination reflect on her inability to harmonize “Happy Birthday” or play any Christmas carols by ear at a family gathering? (p. 122)
There are those educators, however, who are more supportive of the performance/rehearsal model of music education. Notable is that many take a more critical view of it, recognizing its benefits and its limitations. For example, Freer (2011) aptly distills the crux of the above-mentioned criticisms of performance-based music classes into what he calls the “performance-pedagogy paradox.” He acknowledges that excellence in performance is a worthy pursuit. Devoting rehearsal time to focus on developing students’ musicianship skills, however, is also an important imperative.

Similarly, Snow and Apfelstadt (2002) acknowledge performances as a part of the choral curriculum. They envision, however, a shift from the “old paradigm,” that of “rehearsing repertoire for performance” (p. 211) to a choral rehearsal in which developing musical thinking skills “take precedence over non-curricular pressures such as a performance” (p. 200). These authors draw on the work of Schön and reflective practice to depict a scenario in which the choral educator, acting as a facilitator, invites students to problem-solve musical issues by using reflective practice to actively partake in music-making decisions. That is, they call for “reflection in-action” (p. 202) to musical challenges. Such practices develop students’ impressionistic, corporate and supervisory knowledge (Snow & Apfelstadt 2002). Snow’s (1998) work with visually brainstorming rehearsal techniques equips the novice educator with a bevy of possible strategies that he or she can draw upon in the moment of performance or in this case, the moment of teaching. In drawing upon these kinds of pedagogical approaches, Freer (2011) similarly believes that

Performance and pedagogy may not need to be an either-or proposition but rather, a “both and” phenomenon that takes into account students’ abilities: When repertoire and pedagogy are aligned with the abilities and capabilities of singers, the result can be the highest levels of performance quality and musical satisfaction. The goals and purposes of choral performance and choral pedagogy are not hierarchical—they are complementary and synonymous. (p.172)
Music educators have clearly recognized the limitations of the performance model. A narrow focus on pursuing performance goals may have been forged at the expense of developing individual musicianship skills, musical understanding, and fostering continued engagement with music beyond secondary schooling. On the other hand, many music educators work within the rehearsal/performance model that features several performances throughout the school year. How might improvisation mitigate the criticisms launched against this model, while at the same time, support both performance goals and other goals within this setting?

1.6 Improvisation: Enhancing Artistry and Autonomy

Many music educators have lauded improvisation’s educational import. These rationales mirror the objectives outlined in MMCP, CMP, and the Tanglewood Symposium, and also serve to mitigate inherent tensions within the performance-pedagogy paradox. In Getting Started with Vocal Improvisation, music educator Patrice Madura (1999) outlines several reasons for the use of improvisation. When students have the opportunity to be the authors of their own music-making, it “gives personal meaning to the experience” (p. 1). Madura also states that it offers more opportunities for inclusion (1999, p. 1). On this basis, Sarath (1993, 2002) believes improvisation can be used to understand musics from around the world: “This experience accommodates any cultural lineage and cultivates appreciation and understanding of other musics…creating a learning environment that encourages students to express their cultural identities” (1993, p. 24). Schlicht (2007) cites a growing facility with multiple genres, as another reason to include improvisation. Poulter (2008) writes that “successful improvisation heightens the efficacy of the musical experience. It allows students to create, rather than re-create, meaning” (p. 5), and that “improvisation offers aesthetic involvement on individual terms, regardless of musical finesse,” (2008, p. 7). This helps to mitigate aspects of some performance-based ensembles that some critics view as prohibitive.

Freer (2010) alludes to another potential benefit of improvisation, citing Pamela Burnard’s work to suggest that improvisation “promotes students’ autonomy as learners and performers, their ownership of their work, and their ability to transfer musical skills to a variety of contexts” (p.
Sawyer (2007) articulates this point in further detail. He argues that the skills that underlie expert performance, such as “deep conceptual understanding, integrated knowledge, adaptive expertise, [and] collaborative skills” (p. 2) are routinely used in improvisation. Improvisation, Sawyer asserts, caters to fostering these skills that students will be expected to have in order to be prepared for the knowledge economy. He believes that improvisation should be placed at the centre of music education, echoing those sentiments of Sarath (2002).

Freer (2010) also maintains that improvisation could be one way of promoting continued lifelong development of music-making, a pervasive concern in music education (Favaro, 2000; Reimer, 2000; Zenker, 2004). Likewise, Dairianathan (2003) wonders,

> How many trained musicians have been lost because their innate abilities were obstructed or deemed un-musical as a result of not measuring up to established benchmarking systems…benchmarking systems [which] have not identified nor valorised improvisational skills as essential currency[?] (p. 62)

Countryman (2009) concludes that students in music classrooms who were given opportunities to “exercise personal musical agency” (p. 107), citing opportunities to improvise, had more “personally transformative set[s] of experiences” (p. 107). She further noted that those students who were given some autonomy in their music classes, who had since graduated high school, were still involved in music-making endeavours.

Madura (1999) draws on the work of McPherson to affirm that “students who participated in improvisation tend to continue in musical activity as adults” (p. 1). Likewise, Boswell (1992) suggests that lifelong music learning activities should move beyond traditional models of music delivery: we “must make arrangements for ensembles of all types and sizes to fit flexible numbers of participants with different playing abilities” and foster “expanding opportunities in our own communities to provide available sites for active music participation” to include a
balance of “performing, listening, and creative activities” (p.40). Improvisation can play an important role in this pursuit.

1.7 Rationales for Improvisation in the Choral Setting

In addition to the reasons cited above, there are many potential benefits for including improvisation in the choral setting. Azzara (1999) believes that: “If good musicianship and aural skills are the goal of all music programs—instrumental, choral, and general—then improvisation can play an immensely important role in achieving these goals” (p. 25). Bell (2004) underscores a gap in musicianship and aural skills knowledge that could be filled by the use of improvisation: “While most choral teachers are efficient and productive in rehearsal techniques, it is probable that their singers will complete a number of years of school choral singing and never create harmony” (p. 31). Covington (1997) and Santos and Ben (2004) have explored the use of improvisation to promote aural skills, arguing that improvisation represents a synthesis of vertical and horizontal elements of music. In these contexts, improvisation is a way that students can demonstrate their understanding of concepts studied:

> Improvisation in aural pedagogy should not be just a discretionary choice but an essential component; theories of learning and cognition are demonstrating that a skill like improvisation has the potential to be the catalyst for a level of aural synthesis and understanding not being attained by more traditional means. (Covington, 1997, p. 49)

The implications of this last statement are especially noteworthy in choral contexts, where most choral educators will most likely be working with amateur singers (Apfelstadt, 2015).

Despite the challenges of teaching amateur singers reading and listening skills, another aspect of their development as competent choristers, intonation, tends to receive even more focus from scholars and educators. Yet, while Johnson and Klonski (2003) agree that out-of-tune singing can be attributed to faulty vocal production, they also believe that audiation strategies can address faulty intonation. Coined by Gordon (1989), the term audiation refers to the ability to hear music internally without the physical manifestation of sound. As distinct from imitation, audiation
involves an understanding of the syntactical relationships found within a piece, “continuously attending to the tonality and the meter of that music” (p. 11), for example. Gordon (1989) believes that “audiation is the basis of music aptitude” and “thus it becomes the basis of music achievement” (p. 12).

While audiation and intonation can be developed through working with written music, they also benefit from improvisation. Indeed, Gordon (2003) goes a step further and asserts that the relationship between audiation and improvisation is a reciprocal one. He outlines a sequential framework for eight types of audiation, the last three of which include improvisation. Gordon notes that “audiation skill empowers you to predict what you will be hearing as you are attending to unfamiliar music” (Gordon, 2003, p. 12). Similarly, Kratus (1991) identifies audiation as one of the key features of expert improvisers. Elsewhere, Gordon (2007) asserts:

> If you are able to audiate music, you can learn to create, to improvise, and to accompany yourself and other musicians with appropriate harmonic progressions and, if you should so desire, to read and write notation with comprehension. Music becomes your property. (p. 13)

This last statement alone should likely interest those choral educators who are hoping to instill musicianship skills and musical independence in their choristers. Azzara (1993) examined the efficacy of improvisation in relation to improving students’ musicianship. It was found that overall student achievement increased when a group of select elementary music students were exposed to audiation-based improvisatory activities in their band classes. He posits that improvisation enhances students’ performance with the written score, ultimately recommending that researchers “should continue to consider the role of improvisation as a readiness for learning how to comprehend music notation” (p. 340). Despite this finding, vocal improvisation at the secondary and post-secondary level remains mainly limited to jazz settings, where it is embraced as a stylistic hallmark.
Yet, there are other styles of music that are performed in traditional choral settings that invite improvisation. These include African-American spirituals and Renaissance music. Alice Parker (1976) notes that “the salient fact about spirituals is their improvisational quality” (p. 5). Her advice to allow singers to improvise with spirituals is no doubt guided by this principle. As improvisation is an inherent feature of African-American spirituals, and these spirituals are regularly featured in choral concert programs throughout North America, it behooves the choral conductor to explore improvisation with choristers when working with this body of repertoire.

Much of Renaissance choral music was improvised via the use of embellishments (Aamot, 2001; Cooper, 1986; Horsley, 1951). Singers during this time would have been trained in various embellishment patterns and would have been expected to improvise vocal lines using these ornaments. If one of the aims of choral singing is to engage in the authentic study and performance of music, then improvisation must be addressed when working on repertoire such as Renaissance vocal polyphony, African-American spirituals, the African-American practice of shape-note singing (Fox, 2015) and aleatoric music, which accounts for a significant amount of improvisation in choral literature (Madura, 1999, p. 44).

The implication is that choral improvisation could facilitate an exploration of a broader range of styles to move beyond Western art music, the canon of repertoire that is typically favoured (Bartel, 2004b; Cho, 2015; Funk, 1994; Madura, 1999) in traditional choral ensembles. As Freer (2010) summarizes:

Expansion of the choral repertory to include culturally and musically authentic representations of global and popular music traditions forces us to include vocal improvisation experiences. The genres where improvisation is an essential element are already present on many of our concert programs including spirituals, gospel, jazz, blues, and popular musics—not to mention the vocal improvisations that are integral to the many global music traditions now represented within our repertory. We implicitly assume responsibility for the development of vocal improvisation skills when we select these genres for our choral ensembles. (p. 22)
Such explorations may help to counter accusations of a predominantly Eurocentric approach to repertoire. Broadening the choral landscape to include more diverse repertoire may, in turn, encourage more participation from students who otherwise feel they are not represented in these settings.

There are other benefits to incorporating improvisation into choral education. One can readily find anecdotal comments which affirm the powerful role that improvisation can play in one’s self-expression, for example. Choral educator, Matthew Potterton, shares a comment made by a student who had engaged in improvisational activities in the choral setting: “You can do this and totally express yourself—you can express so much emotion…You can’t sing like this and not feel…you have to be totally involved in the process…it’s such a powerful emotional experience” (Williamson, 2009, p. 296). Similarly, Hirschorn (2011) reports that a number of students who were surveyed about their attitudes toward improvisation instruction within a choral setting referenced the word “freedom” in their descriptions (p. 212): “In the words of some participants, “the freedom to choose what notes to sing” led to feelings of enjoyment and personal satisfaction” (p.212). Hirschorn further observes that

in a broad sense, participants felt that opportunities for free expression allowed them to explore their unique, personal qualities or “musical personality” [Hargreaves, Miell & McDonald, 2002, p. 12 quoted in Hirschorn, 2011, p. 212]. By valuing free expression and creative autonomy, the young adolescents in this study seemed to be willing to experiment with a possible self that embraces these notions (Freer, 2010). (Hirschorn, 2011, p. 212)

The implications of these statements are twofold: 1) improvisation could also allow teachers to see students’ unique personal qualities, which may otherwise be obscured in a group learning environment such as choir, and 2) it would also seem that in this case, improvisation encouraged increased levels of intrinsic motivation among students.
Yun and Willingham (2014) relay similar observations of students who participated the choral project JABBLE! Choral students from three different choral ensembles explored improvisation in several ways, including improvising within aleatoric sections of a piece, giving fresh realizations of skeletal compositions referred to as “minimal musical embryos” (p. 240) and by drawing on material from notated scores to improvise material that would serve as transitions in between pieces during a performance. The authors commented that one of the perceived benefits of engaging in these types of improvisatory strategies was that students demonstrated an “awakened enthusiasm for choir” (p. 245) that had not been present in previous academic terms of study.

These comments are worthy of consideration, as many choral educators are faced with the perennial problem of working with students who are forced to take choir as part of their course degree requirements. Improvisation could serve as one way to motivate these students to engage in activities at hand. Indeed, student feedback from Yun and Willingham’s (2014) project suggest that the improvisation activities undertaken by the students fostered an intrinsic desire to attend choir rehearsals:

It made me look forward to going to choir everyday…This was such a unique experience. . . Everyone walked away so happy!... I really enjoyed the experience and was happy with how it ended up. I wanted to take more solos and leadership. I would do it again and would love to do more. (p. 245)

Similarly, Hirschorn (2011) reports one participant’s enthusiasm for choir in relation to improvisation and repertoire:

Bruce observed that the inclusion of improvisation added an important dimension to the standard choral repertoire: “Sometimes that gets kind of old, just singing the same thing over and over. But if you are doing an improvisational piece, sometimes when you get to the improv part, it just kind of mixes it up and it gives it a little bit more aliveness.” (p. 147)
Both of these examples illustrate still more possible benefits of incorporating improvisation into traditional choral settings. Improvisation seemed to promote student engagement by giving opportunities for leadership and fostering a positive learning environment.

Using choral improvisation can also aid in the vocal development of choristers. In his article “Choral Improvisation, Tensions and Resolutions,” Freer (2010) asserts that “improvisation permits singers to make music without concern for the range or tessitura of a printed vocal line” (p. 25). This may help to mitigate vocal issues that ensue when students are asked to sing in standard vocal ranges of choral music that may be problematic for some singers.

In addition to developing vocal skills and aural skills, many choral conductors seek to develop performance skills. Adapting to in-the-moment situations that occur in performances is not often rehearsed. We rehearse for the performance, but we do not spend time rehearsing the performance itself. How can we teach students to be more adept at adapting to in-the-moment situations such as performance by using improvisation? Santos and Ben (2004) believe another potential benefit of using improvisation is that it gives students practice with responding to, reacting to, and recovering from in-the-moment events such as lapses in concentration, for example, which can happen in performance.

Improvisation can also help to promote ensemble skills. Yun and Willingham (2014) observe that improvisation promotes a heightened awareness referred to as deep listening, a term coined by composer Pauline Oliveros: deep listening is “listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear no matter what one is doing” (Oliveros, n.d.). “Deep Listening includes non-judgmental perception, the development of empathy through listening, the creation of non-hierarchical social relationships in music making, the expanded use of intuitive forms of internal and external awareness” (Osborne, 2000). The “external awareness” and “internal awareness” in choral contexts could refer to an awareness of the individual and the singers around him/her.
Choristers in JABBLE! put Deep Listening into practice by creating “inclusive sound” where their own voice was neither completely subsumed nor dominant in the musical textures. Using musical empathy, they created a local space where everyone’s musical ideas could be acknowledged, supported, and in many cases passed along and developed. (p. 242)

Thus, improvisation in choral settings can be understood to enhance the collective nature of performance-based ensembles. “Much like the collaborative music-making that can occur in traditional choral rehearsals, improvisation can be as much a democratic, social endeavor as a musical one” (Freer, 2010, p. 25). This argument is advanced by Yun and Willingham (2014), who draw attention to the musical skills that were reinforced by engaging in free improvisation via Deep Listening. Interestingly, while improvisation in this context was new for the students and conductors alike, the results of these experiments reinforced long-standing ensemble goals that are typically pursued in choral settings.

Development of “musical empathy” or “deep listening” replaced conventional error recognition and correction as well as “sound unifications” (blending and balancing) normally mitigated from the podium. As the choir improved at this sort of listening and interaction, the musical ideas and textures became more comprehensible, sophisticated, and interesting. Simply put, the greater degree of musical empathy, the more cohesive, communicative, and enriching the choral experience. (p. 242)

Clearly, then, there are many benefits to utilizing improvisation in music classroom settings. Improvisation can mitigate barriers to notation and provide opportunities for all students to participate in music-making activities, regardless of proficiency. Using improvisation also creates opportunities to learn about musics which feature this approach to music-making. Improvisation also fosters student autonomy and agency and may prove to be instrumental in promoting a lifelong relationship beyond school settings. In addition to these reasons, choral educators may be attracted by improvisation’s ability to foster social and aural cohesion, promote aural and vocal skills, and reinforce performance practices of selected repertoire. Improvisation
will also likely appeal to choral educators who work within the performance-pedagogy paradox (Freer, 2011).

Despite repeated calls for the implementation of improvisation, research confirms that improvisation has not been widely embraced in music education settings (Azzara 2002; Bartel, 2004b; Lehman, 2008). Improvisation remains largely the purview of instrumental jazz and vocal jazz programs and, to varying degrees, a feature of three common approaches to elementary music education: Kodály, Orff, and Dalcroze (Azzara 2002; Campbell 2009; Countryman, 2009; Kenny & Gellrich, 2002; Lehman 2008; Pignato 2013; Schopp, 2006). A study examining three choral educators and their use of improvisation in secondary and tertiary school settings may shed light on how improvisation could be realized in other music education settings in addition to those mentioned above.

1.8 Need for this Study

Considerable research has focused on why improvisation is not widely embraced as a phenomenon and how obstacles to utilizing improvisation may be overcome. Many of these studies focus on elementary music teachers, general music teachers, and pre-service teachers (Bernhard 2013; Bernhard & Stringham 2016; Byo, 1999; Niknafs, 2013b; Pietra & Campbell, 1995; Ward-Steinman 2007; Whitcomb, 2013). There is little research that examines these issues specifically from a choral educator’s perspective in secondary institutions. This is worthy of consideration, as choral singing is one of the main vehicles through which music education is delivered in many secondary school settings throughout North America (Abril & Gault, 2008; Hills Strategy Research, 2010).

Additionally, research into the study of how children improvise has led to theories of how improvisation may be taught (Kratus, 1991; Swanwick & Tillman, 1986). A number of publications focus on improvisation strategies to use in the elementary and secondary school music classrooms (Agrell, 2008; Azzara 1999; Campbell 1991; Gagne, 2014). Examining how
these strategies are actually implemented and realized from a teacher’s perspective represents a topic of research that has garnered little attention, however (Hickey, 2015; Pignato, 2013). While Hirschorn (2011) does include his personal reflections in teaching improvisation to his choral students, the main focus of his study is on his choral students themselves. Pignato (2013) profiles music educators, one of whom teaches choral music as part of her assignment, but the focus of his study was not particularized to the choral setting itself. Accordingly, I could not find studies in which the chief focus was an examination of the use of improvisation in choral settings from the perspective of a choral educator; hence, my interest is in filling this gap in the literature.

1.9 Objectives

The intent of this study is to shed light on the practices of three choral educators who routinely use improvisation with their students. Using the case study model, I collected data through observation of and semi-structured interviews with three participants. Three central questions guided this study:

1) Why should improvisation be used in choral settings?

2) How can improvisation be used in choral settings?

3) What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings?

This study will serve as a resource for choral educators wishing to utilize improvisation with their students by providing models for teachers to study and emulate.

1.10 Situating the Researcher

A variety of seminal experiences have prompted my desire to explore improvisation in choral education. My early interest in musical improvisation stems from my studies as a vocalist, where I gravitated to the practice of embellishing Baroque arias, and performed works that featured indeterminacy such as Cage’s (1965) Aria for Voice, and Berberian’s (1966) Stripsody. More
recently, I attended a vocal jazz camp as a way to broaden my skill set. While there, I was tasked with improvising over twelve bars of music. The experience was unnerving, yet ultimately exhilarating. I wondered to what extent students would not only enjoy these kinds of experiences, but how improvisation may further broaden students’ skill sets.

As a music educator working with students in a general music class, and as advocates cited above, I found improvisation a good way to create an inclusive atmosphere for music-making, regardless of students’ musical training and experience. Improvisation also helped to counter a dependency on the written score, providing students with considerable reading skills a new avenue for exploration and development.

As a graduate student pursuing a doctorate in choral conducting, I began to realize the limitations of the way I had been delivering music instruction to choral students. Trained in the rehearsal-model of music classes, I embarked upon this model with students. Performances were prioritized, and rehearsals often reflected these performance goals. This myopic focus raised a number of questions. Were the students I had taught leaving high school as better readers or simply as better followers? Was I doing enough to foster continued engagement with choral singing beyond high school? I wondered how I might temper the over-emphasis on performance and teacher-centred learning that had pervaded my teaching. I also began to suspect that improvisation might provide new and powerful solutions to the problem.

Indeed, the literature suggests this very thing. However, there remains a tremendous gap between theory and practice when it comes to improvisation. As a researcher, I am intrigued by the question: why is improvisation encouraged so strongly in writing about choral education but seemingly so neglected in practice by choral educators?

My interest in improvisation in choral settings speaks to a desire to embrace both constructivist views and also critical pedagogy where classrooms become sites for promoting student-centred
learning, providing opportunities for discovery, growth, and autonomy, for destabilizing hierarchical structures, and for fostering transformative experiences for the students and teachers alike. Abrahams (2007) outlines these sentiments in describing critical pedagogy for music education.

‘Critical pedagogy is a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationships among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation state’ (McLaren, 1998, p. 45). The focus is on developing the potential of both student and teacher. It is a perspective that looks toward expanding possibilities by acknowledging who the children and their teachers are, and building on their strengths while recognizing and assessing their needs. Critical Pedagogy for Music Education invites teachers to use many different teaching strategies to accomplish this mission, which is to empower children to be musicians. (p. 6)

There is, of course, an inherent tension in these goals. The nature of the traditional choral setting places, both literally and figuratively, the conductor as the leader and centre of learning. How might this paradigm be challenged with the use of improvisation? Moreover, how might improvisation enhance the choral setting, given the inherent limitations of performance-based ensembles? Improvisation may be the key to transforming current choral paradigms into new sites for exploration, renewal, and innovation.

1.11 Definition of Terms

The term *choral setting* refers to an environment in which singers study, learn, and perform music as an ensemble, primarily by reading notated scores. In typical performance settings, a conductor selects the repertoire, guides the rehearsal, and navigates the ensemble’s musical direction. Musical leadership also entails development of musicianship skills through sight-reading and aural skills. Performance of choral repertoire with the purpose of achieving standards of musical excellence is often a chief goal of these ensembles. My research into choral
settings is limited to secondary and post-secondary settings only, focusing on high school and university choirs.

The meaning(s) of the term *improvisation* are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. For the purposes of this chapter, however, improvisation is defined as *the audible expression of musical thought created in the moment of performance*.

1.12 Parameters of the Study

This study focuses on choral educators who work with either secondary or post-secondary students and who routinely use improvisation with their students. With three subjects only, I will not be able to generalize the findings of this study to a broad population, but expect to discern information about improvisation that may be of value to other music teachers.

While *conduction*, a repertoire of uniquely tailored conducting gestures, is used in many improvisational instances involving group improvisation, I did not explore this aspect of improvisation in this study.

1.13 Outline of Dissertation

In this chapter, I have briefly outlined the context under which improvisation in music education settings exists, the rationale for this study, the research questions, pertinent definitions, the scope of the study, and have described my interest in improvisation as a topic for research in order to investigate how and to what effects three choral educators at the secondary and post-secondary levels implement improvisation in choral settings. The remaining chapters are organized as follows. Chapter 2 situates the study within relevant literature, drawing from the realms of musicology, ethnomusicology, cognitive psychology, and music education. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of the study and accounts for how the data was collected and organized. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study by offering a description of the participants’ approaches and by highlighting key commonalities that emerged through analysis of the data.
collected. Chapter 5, describes the implications of this research in relation to choral settings and recommendations for further areas of research.
Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

2.1 Mapping Improvisation

A review of the literature on the subject of improvisation reveals that mapping this phenomenon is a complex pursuit, for “the idea of improvisation has long been fraught with ambiguity, prejudice, and negative connotations, making it the subject of numerous terminological debates” (Feisst, 2016, p. 207). Ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl (2009), who has written extensively on the topic, writes, “we probably never should have started calling it ‘improvisation’ (p. ix) in part because of commonly held misconceptions of this term.” Such misconceptions, Treitler (1991) observes, are that to improvise is “to perform without preparation…according to the whim of the moment” (p. 66). Similarly, the Latin root of “improvise,” *improvisus*, meaning “unforeseen,” inadvertently reinforces assumptions that improvisation is both a “mysterious” and “magical” act (Campbell, 2009, p. 121), ostensibly rendering this phenomenon “altogether distant and unknowable as well as impracticable by all but a very select few” (Solis, 2009, p. 1).

Researchers, educators, and performers, however, have endeavoured to describe improvisation from a variety of viewpoints. These include problematizing improvisation within the context of Western European art music and the ways in which improvisation itself is defined. Other researchers have enlisted cognitive psychology and neuroscience to probe our understanding of this phenomenon. Another path of inquiry uses group dynamics as its basis to describe ways in which musicians improvise together. The following summary details these varied viewpoints, organized into two broad categories: “improvisation as a concept” and “improvisation as a process” (Nettl, 1974, p. 4).
2.2 Improvisation and the Politics of Western Art Music

The study of improvisation in the 20th century owes much to the burgeoning interest in jazz studies, and emphases on the study of South, West, and Southeastern Asian cultures in the field of ethnomusicology (Nettl, 1998, p. 2). In the field of musicology, however, which focuses primarily on the study of Western European music, improvisation had been “an art neglected in scholarship” (Nettl, 1998, p. 1) because the connotations of improvisation mentioned above seemingly contravene the tenets of Western art music. These include “precision of planning, complexity of relationships and interrelationships,” and “control” as evidenced in “intricately organized works such as symphonies, operas and concertos” (Nettl, 1998, p. 8). Because of these perceptions, Nettl (1998) believes that improvisation has been placed “on a low rung” (p. 9) within the purview of scholarship of Western art music:

A significant segment of Western art music culture, including even musicologists and other musical academics, associate improvisation as a musical practice and even more as a concept, with a kind of “third world” of music. Jazz, the music of non-Western cultures, all music in oral tradition is somehow included in here. (Nettl, 2008, p. 5)

While improvisation has garnered increasing attention from musicologists over the last few decades (Nettl, 2013), their neglect of the topic for much of the 20th century is ironic, given that numerous performance practices throughout the history of Western European music have, in fact, featured it. As the title suggests, Ernest Ferand’s landmark publication Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music is a compendium of improvising traditions spanning from Gregorian chant to the 1800s (Wishart, 1962, p. 335). Similarly, several authors (Gould & Keaton, 2000; Prieto 2002; Sawyer, 1999; Solis 2009) have pointed out that eminent composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Chopin were lauded not only for their compositional output and innovation, but also for their improvisational prowess.

Yet, scholarship has also pointed to at least one reason for the apparent lack of musicological interest in improvisation. Improvisation as a musical practice fell out of favour in the 19th
century. Feisst (2016) observes that improvisation lost significance in the late 1800s because of
the increasing emphasis on opus music that pervaded the musical landscape: “Since the late
nineteenth century, ‘opus music’ had been portrayed as prestigious artefacts with complex
structures and sophisticated forms that were detailed in a score, straightforwardly reproducible,
performable, marketable, and theorizable” (Feisst, 2016, p. 207).

Several musicologists consider the role of class, specifically the burgeoning middle class, as
influential to the demise of improvisation in 19th century Western art music practices. Rink
(quoted in Nettl, Wegman, Horsley, Collins, Carter, Garden, Seletsky, Levin, Crutchfield, Rink,
Griffiths & Kernfeld, 2014) writes that during the 19th century, “improvisation…served more
prosaic ends by pandering to a music-consuming bourgeoisie that craved brilliance and
sensation, thus encouraging its rapid decline as trivialization threatened the artistic originality
that had distinguished it in its 18th-century heyday” (Section III, subsection 5, para. I).
Elsewhere, Rink (1993) notes that the salon, wherein improvisation thrived, was replaced by
“larger and formal concerts in which extemporaneous music-making was deemed inappropriate”
(p. 46).

Moore (1992) suggests that the burgeoning middle class may have contributed to improvisation’s
demise in Western art music in other ways. As the “middle class musician replaces the
aristocratic patronage system,” sheet music becomes “a means of learning aristocratic music for
those who had no exposure to it in its original context” (p. 72). This may help to explain why
some composers begin to write out ornaments that they themselves would have improvised. In
the Classical era, “Composers wrote out embellishments for the benefit of amateurs or students,
who, unlike the composer or virtuosos, were not expected to have mastered the art of
improvisation” (Levin quoted in Nettl et al., 2014). Moore (1992) surmises that a lack of
familiarity with improvisational practices in Western art music combined with other factors—a
“codified canon of classical repertoire” (p. 73), the advent of music conservatories, the
ascendancy of the conductor, and the burgeoning industry of recorded performances (p. 73)—
likely contributed to the relative demise of improvisation within Western art music practices of
the late 19th and early 20th century.
Aspiring art musicians became increasingly self-conscious in the performance of canonized works, and tended to rely more heavily on the interpretive advice of influential music professionals, rather than untutored instinct. This dependence upon the advice of others reflects a desire to emulate the musical practices of social elites at the expense of individual expression. (Moore, 1992, p. 73)

Ethnomusicologist Laudan Nooshin (2003) frames the decline of improvisation in Western European music on a broader scale:

It was…no coincidence that the very period when Europe was consolidating its colonial power was also the time that improvisation started to become devalued in favour of the solidity, permanence and strength represented by the great, notated, nineteenth century master (sic) works. (p. 249)

Of all the contributing factors presented here, the valorization of the written score seems to have wielded the most influence on the decline of improvisation in Western European music in the 19th century, relegating this practice to organ playing and, later in the early 20th century, to accompanying silent films (Rink & Griffiths in Nettl et al., 2014).

After a span of 150 years in the Western European tradition, improvisation emerged as a new site for investigation and innovation, as noted by Lewis (1996, p. 91). In particular, he challenged a common assumption that renewed interest in improvisation in the post-war era was unique among composers in the Western-European tradition, or even solely a matter of their efforts. Lewis asserts:

Anointing…of various forms of jazz, the African-American musical constellation most associated with the exploration of improvisation in both Europe and America, as an “art” has in all likelihood been a salient stimulating factor in this re-evaluation of possibilities for improvisation. (p. 92)
Further politicizing this shift and surrounding discourse, Lewis (1996) argues that avant-garde composers in the post-war era used the term *indeterminacy*, ostensibly stepping away from the word “improvisation” and whitewashing practices that are, nevertheless, similar to it. Feisst’s (2009) examination of John Cage, who she described as a “key figure and a catalyst for the avant-garde movements” (p. 38), and his relationship with improvisation throughout his career, confirms the tendency to recast the word improvisation from both an etymological and philosophical view, including a denunciation of improvisation in jazz contexts (p. 41).

**2.3 Composition vs. Improvisation**

Several authors (Feisst, 2016; Lewis & Piekut, 2016; Nettl, 1998) have referred to earlier definitions of improvisation in which improvisation is seen as a compositional sketch or as a kind of “accelerated composition” (Sarath, 1996, p. 1). These views are problematic for Sarath (2002), who has written extensively on the nature of improvisation, because they fail to recognize improvisation as a music-making enterprise in and of itself:

> The lack of a compelling means for differentiating the two processes continues to relegate improvisation to a subcategory of composition, where it is presumed that the improviser in a single moment seeks to pursue the same strategies carried out by the composer over weeks or months. (p. 189)

Sarath (1996) asserts that the main difference between composition and improvisation is the emphasis of temporal modes. In improvisation the past and the future are subsumed and the present is heightened (1996, p. 3), a phenomenon that Sarath (2002) refers to as “an inner-directed temporal conception” (p. 189). The improviser does not have opportunities to revise his or her creation. Composers, on the other hand, can traverse the past, present, and future when plotting out their compositions. Rzewski (1999) provides a colourful metaphor to illustrate this point:
One could say that composition is a process of selectively storing and organizing information accumulated from the past, so that it becomes possible to move ahead without having constantly to reinvent the wheel. Improvisation, on the other hand, is more like garbage removal: constantly clearing away the accumulated perceptions of the past, so that it becomes possible to move ahead at all. (p. 379)

Sarath (2002) believes the resulting architectural differences between improvisation and composition likely fuel perceptions that improvisations are less sophisticated than composed works (p. 189). As a way to push against lack of revision as an argument against sophistication, Nooshin (2003) argues that improvisers do have opportunities to revise and refine their work. She notes that whereas composers refine the score, revision and refinement in improvisation is the result of years of performing (p. 252).

Sarath (1996) further distinguishes improvisation from composition through the notion of transcendence and how it is achieved. He describes transcendence as “a heightened awareness state in which interactive and inventive potential is enhanced” (p. 14). According to Sarath, (2002), transcendence in improvising is achieved by the moment-to-moment real-time creations, whereas in composition, it lies in the “large-scale formal relationships possible in composed music” (p. 189). Rzewski’s (1999) comments on differences between composition and improvisation reflect Sarath’s views:

Composition is the result of an editing process in which one’s impulses are passed through the critical filter of the conscious mind: only the “good” ideas are allowed to pass through. Improvisation is more like free association, in which ideas are allowed to express themselves without having to pass this test, somehow avoiding the barriers erected to consciousness. (p. 379)

In broader terms, several authors problematize the way improvisation is often contextualized in relation to its distinctness from composition. “Only with dualistic thinking, which presents two
things as opposed and forces one to choose between them, are preparing for something in advance and the leap of freedom into the unforeseen viewed as antithetical or incompatible” (Borgo, 2006, p. 19). Nettl (2013) alludes to this dualism in his summary of improvisation in musical scholarship: “improvisation—or as it was often called, extemporization—was seen as a kind of craft, in contrast to the art of composition” (para. 1). Nooshin (2003) explores how notions of improvisation as “other” served as a way to privilege Western European music over other types: “For decades, improvisation had served partly as an arena to play out Western representations of the primitive and untutored ‘other’” (p. 250). She adds that “improvisation came to represent everything that composition was not: simple, ephemeral, irrational, inexplicable, created at a ‘whim’ on the ‘spur of the moment’ by the ‘primitive,’ ‘untutored’ mind” (p. 246). With Nooshin’s comments in mind one may begin to see how so-called “oral traditions” represented by jazz and non-Western musics may have “somehow” been relegated to a type of “third world music” (Nettl, 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, Nooshin (2003) asserts,

One might ask to what extent musicological discourses are implicated or bound up with these political dualisms, for it is perhaps not such a great leap from discourses which suggest essential differences between musical systems to those which imply essential differences between the people who make that music. (p. 260)

Nettl (2013), echoing these concerns, cautions against a unilateral division of composition and improvisation (para. 6).

2.4 Binding Contradictions: The Parametrics and Politics of Improvisation

Consensus on a definition of improvisation is a contentious and elusive proposition. Attempts to define improvisation as distinct from composition have historically resulted in privileging Western European art music over other types of music. Descriptions of improvisation can seem imprecise because many defining elements of improvisation “are not absolute, but relative” (Nooshin, 2003, p. 253) and can embrace a wide spectrum of parameters, leading some practitioners to evade defining improvisation altogether.
Despite the differences between composition and improvisation mentioned above, there are points of intersection between these two musical processes. “All improvisers know that improvisation does not mean that anything goes—improvisation always occurs within a structure, and all improvisers draw on ready-mades—short motifs or clichés—as they create their novel performance” (Sawyer 2006, p. 157). Similarly, Treitler (1991) writes of “singing on the book” (p. 80), the documented performance practice of improvising medieval music based on a canon of memorized melodic patterns. To what extent does pre-composed music figure into defining improvisation itself? If improvisers are drawing on ready-mades, is it still considered improvisation?

Defining improvisation using either-or propositions is problematic, as such propositions do not adequately address these complementary points of intersection between composition and improvisation. Music educator and scholar Solis (2016) noted that his graduate students moved beyond an either-or definition of improvisation, because “it did not seem relevant to the questions about creative musicality in the moment of playing” (p. 102). He continues:

This discursive shift was useful, as part of a praxis-based pedagogy, I believe, in part because it opened up a set of topics for conversation that are implicit, but difficult to talk about explicitly within a framework in which “improvisation” and “composition” are the principal categories of analysis—even if they are seen as points on a continuum. (p. 102)

Furthermore, these processes, distinct as they are, are also inextricably linked together:

There is a continuum of possibilities between extreme hypothetical limits of “pure” improvisation and “pure” composition. These limits are never obtained in live performance because no improver (even in “free” improvisation) can avoid the use of previously learned material, and no re-creative performer can avoid small variations specific to each occasion. (Pressing, 1984, p. 346)

Nevertheless, improvisation is often defined by the presence or absence of parameters. Hence terms such as structured versus free or idiomatic versus non-idiomatic improvisation, or
Campbell’s (2009) use of “tighties and loosies” (p. 125) to compare improvisers who are bound by many constraints to those who improvise within few constraints. Huovinen, Tenkanen, and Vesa-Pekka (2011) distinguish between music-theoretical and dramaturgical improvisation. Music-theoretical improvisation relies on, for example, scales and chord structures. Dramaturgical improvisation embraces freer forms of improvisation which rely “less on concepts of music theory and more on holistic images, broader “architectonic” features and ideas of subjective expression” (Huovinen et al., 2011, p. 84).

Improvisation has been described in even broader terms. Berkowitz (2010) offers “spontaneous creativity within constraints” (p. 1) as a possible definition. Lewis’ (1996) description of improvisation as “real time music making” (p. 92) embraces an even wider range of practices. Nettl (2013) wonders “whether all the things we include under the rubric of improvisation have enough in common to justify a collective term” (para. 5).


A lack of consensus as to what improvisation is has led to charges of fraudulent improvisation, further obfuscating our understanding of this phenomenon. In reviewing Ferand’s treatise on improvisation, Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music, Wishart (1962) decries, “The title is misleading, because most of it concerns improvised embellishment rather than what we usually mean by improvisation” (p. 335). Wishart does not provide a definition, however. Music educator Peggie (1985) writes that

music of the European classical tradition has, in the twentieth century, veered almost completely away from integrated improvisation. (Composers from Henry Cowell
onwards have often tried artificially to reintroduce elements of performer choice as a substitute for improvisation.) (p. 167)

Nettl’s (1974) observation that while “we feel that we know intuitionally what improvisation is, we find that there is confusion regarding its essence” (p. 4), thus continues to resonate. Moreover, this uncertainty continues to have implications for the study of improvisation and its teaching in applied settings, including choirs.

2.5 Cognitive Considerations

2.5.1 Jeff Pressing

Cognitive psychologist Jeff Pressing (1984, 1998a, 1998b) has contributed significantly to our understanding of improvisation. His articles outlining the role of improvisation in Western European music offer concise descriptions of the forms of improvisational activities and approaches that appeared throughout the development of this canon of music. His theories of cognition in relation to improvisation, moreover, shed light on the processes involved in improvising. Improvisation, Pressing posits, essentially involves the transformation of sensory input into motor output (1984, p. 353). He proposes a tri-partite structure to explain this phenomenon. In the first stage, the improviser receives stimulus and encodes it. In the second stage, she evaluates possible responses, and in the third stage, she executes or produces a musical idea.

With regards to generative processes of improvisation, Pressing (1998b) surmises that these are associative and “interruptible” (p. 56): “each new seed generated will almost always be the result of combining previously learned gestures, movement patterns or concepts in a novel relationship or context” (1984, p. 351). While he acknowledges that new ideas can form spontaneously, evaluation and the subsequent generation of ideas is largely informed by previous material, training, technique, other performers, occasion, and feedback (Pressing, 1984, pp. 351–353).
Another key variable that affects the generation of musical ideas is the improviser’s relationship with what Pressing theorizes as the knowledge base and the referent. The referent is a particular aspect of music such as a scale or mode, a song form, or even a non-musical element such as an image that is used as the basis for improvising (Pressing, 1984, p. 346). Pressing (1998b) positions improvisers as exemplars of expert behaviour through their deliberate practice with use of referents. In so doing, he argues, improvisers develop an extensive knowledge base that allows them to shift their attention to higher order cognitive tasks such as evaluating and generating ideas (Beaty, 2015, p. 109). The greater the knowledge base, the more attention the improviser can allocate to respond to in-the-moment unfolding of events, thereby increasing improvisational fluency. Pressing (1998b) further posits that the rapid rate at which improvisers are asked to make in-the-moment decisions in a performance underscores the notion of an improviser as an expert; “immediate access to relevant knowledge” is an important “dimension distinguishing masters, experts, and novices” (Chase & Simon, 1973, quoted in Pressing (1998b, p. 53).

There are several researchers who have adopted Pressing’s theories to expand our understanding of improvisation. For example, researchers Kenny and Gellrich (2002) build on Pressing’s theories to discuss ways in which improvisers contend with the most important of constraints in improvisation, time. Because improvisation occurs in the moment of performance, “such temporal constraints necessitate a series of efficient mechanisms designed to facilitate improvising in real time” (p. 117). The authors propose a set of eight cognitive processes involved during improvisation that are based on combinations of anticipation, memory, flow, and feedback: short-term anticipation, medium-term anticipation, long-term anticipation, short-term recall, medium-term recall, long-term recall, flow status, and feedback processes (p. 124).

Similarly, Beaty (2015) recalls Pressing’s theoretical model of improvisation to review advances in neuroscience as it relates to musical improvisation. He notes that improvisational fluency relies on the interplay of short-term feedback, i.e., “ongoing motor movements” (p. 109) and long-term feedback, i.e., “decision making and response selection” (p. 109) in order “to minimize the distance between intended output and actual performance” (p. 109). Beaty’s
summary corresponds to Kenny and Gellrich’s (2002) description of improvisation as “the necessary disguising and making musical sense of mistakes” (p. 120).

Pressing’s models of improvisation have broadened both our understanding of improvisation in relation to generative processes and also the prioritizing of certain cognitive processes via automatization. This brief overview of Pressing’s theories support Berkowitz’s (2010) summation that Jeff Pressing was “arguably the most important pioneer in theorization about the cognitive basis of improvisation” (p. 3).

2.5.2 Improvisation and Language

Aaron Berkowitz, a leading neuroscientist who has written extensively on the topic of improvisation, has helped to strengthen the parallels between music and improvisation and language and speech. Chris Azzara (1999), a leading music education scholar on the topic of improvisation, has said that speech is to language as improvisation is to music: “Improvisation in music is analogous to the extemporaneous expression of ideas in language” (p. 22). Similarly, music educator and researcher Patricia Shehan Campbell (2009) notes that “improvisation has been described by oral-formula scholars as units and phrases that are spontaneously put together in the moment of performance” (p. 125). Berkowitz (2010) thoroughly analyzes the relationship between musical improvisation and speech in The Improvising Mind, concluding that “from the theoretical perspectives of component processes and their relative accessibility to consciousness, spontaneous speech and musical improvisation thus appear to have much in common” (2010, p. 149). Elsewhere, in recounting the findings of a 2008 study co-authored with Ansari, Berkowitz (2016) concludes that “we demonstrated that the IFG/vPMC [the inferior frontal gyrus/ventral premotor cortex], an area known to be important in language, is also involved in musical improvisation…Musical improvisation and spontaneous speech therefore appear to be analogous at both theoretical and neurobiological levels” (p. 63).
2.5.3 Neuroscience and Improvisation

Neuroscientists are beginning to shed light on areas of the brain that are involved in musical improvisation by analyzing data gleaned from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). Accordingly, Berkowitz (2016) believes that

the fundamental cognitive processes supporting improvisation appear to be the generation and recombination of musical sequences (IFG/vPMC) [the inferior frontal gyrus/ventral premotor cortex], the selection among such sequences (ACC) [the anterior cingulate cortex], and the execution of the chosen sequence (dPMC) [the dorsal premotor cortex].

(p. 61)

Several neuroscientists have examined the role of cognitive control in musical improvisation (Beaty, 2015). While Beaty (2015, pp. 114–115) notes that the results of studies related to cognitive control have yielded conflicting results, two studies in particular are worthy of consideration. Berkowitz (2016) outlines the findings of his study, co-authored by Ansari, which was conducted in 2010. Berkowitz and Ansari measured the brain activity of musicians and non-musicians performing improvisational tasks. With certain improvisational tasks, the musicians, as compared to the non-musicians, showed a decrease in activity in an area of the brain known as the right temporal junction (rTPJ). Berkowitz (2016) describes this decrease in activity as a “tuning out of stimuli” (p. 61) so that a person can focus on one task while filtering out other “potentially disruptive stimuli to which reorientation would prove disruptive to the goal behavior” (p. 61). This finding corresponds to Pressing’s theory of automatization, wherein certain skills are automatized and require less attention in order to focus on high order thinking skills when improvising.

Similarly, Limb and Braun (2008) analyzed the differences in brain activity of six professional jazz musicians while they improvised melodies on the piano over a given jazz chord structure. The researchers also measured the musicians’ brain activity while the subjects played a fixed composition they had memorized. Limb and Braun noted that when the musicians were improvising, they displayed patterns of deactivation in the lateral orbitofrontal cortex (LOFC)
and portions of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC), areas that are thought “to provide a cognitive framework within which goal-directed behaviours are consciously monitored, evaluated and corrected” (p. 4). The researchers observed an increase in activation, however, of the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), (p. 3). This area of the brain is thought to play “a role in the neural instantiation of self, organizing internally, motivated, self-generated, and stimulus-independent behaviours” (p. 4). Limb and Braun surmise that “whereas activation of the lateral regions appears to support self-monitoring and focused attention, deactivation may be associated with defocused, free-floating attention that permits spontaneous unplanned associations, and sudden insights and realizations” (p. 4). The authors conclude that

musical creativity vis-à-vis improvisation may be a result of the combination of intentional, internally generated self-expression (MPFC-mediated) with the suspension of self-monitoring and related processes (LOFC-and DLPFC-mediated) that typically regulate conscious control of goal-directed, predictable, or planned actions (pp. 4-5)

In short, Limb and Braun’s (2008) findings regarding the prefrontal cortex illustrate improvisation as “a balance between self-expression and self-monitoring” (Berkowitz, 2016, p. 62).

Although there are relatively few published studies on the neuroscience of musical improvisation (Berkowitz, 2016, p. 57), several researchers have begun to unearth the cognitive processes involved when musicians improvise. Berkowitz’s (2016) comments regarding this field of study are worthy of consideration in anticipation of the following section: “thus, the neuroscience of improvisation reflects a near-universal intuitive understanding by improvising musicians of the component processes necessary for improvisation…and also appears to correlate with improvisers’ subjective experience of improvisation” (p. 62).

### 2.6 Surveying Performers about Improvisation

A number of researchers have engaged performers to help explain the phenomenon of improvisation. The performers themselves can offer insights into improvising behaviour:
improvising performers in general have access, by introspection, proprioception, and self-observation, to additional information about such issues as learning, training, the usefulness of imagery, muscular coordination, and cognitive processing” (Pressing, 1984, p. 345). Nettl (1998) refers to several publications that have been carried out by or in consultation with improvisers: Sudnow’s (1978) autoethnographic account Ways of the Hand, Berliner’s (1994) Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Act of Improvisation, and Bailey’s (1992) Improvisation. Researchers Biasutti and Frezza (2009) and Wopereis, Stoyanov, Kirschner, and Merriënboer (2013) have also pursued performer-based studies of improvisation. One of the key characteristics of improvisation that improvisers identified in Wopereis et al.’s study is risk taking, which is described by Kenny and Gellrich (2002) as “a self-induced state of uncertainty where repetition and predictable response become virtually impossible” (p. 120). Wilson and MacDonald’s (2012) interviews with jazz musicians yielded an important finding in relation to participants’ perceptions of improvisation. The researchers noted two distinct views of improvisation:

We termed these recurring patterns of accounting the “mastery” and “mystery” repertoires. In the mastery repertoire, improvised jazz was accounted for as musical activity understood and controlled through hard-won mastery of knowledge and skills; while in the mystery repertoire, improvisation in jazz was accounted for as the intangible result of inspiration, instinctive and uncontrolled. The first of these points of view casts improvisation as an explicable practice; the musicians’ effort, commitment and experience grants them agency through mastery. From the second point of view, improvisational ability is cast as inexplicable and thus passive, a fortuitous and mysterious capacity of gifted or inspired individuals in the grip of the music. (p. 561)

Interviewing improvisers themselves offers unique insights into how improvisation may be understood, often corroborating conceptions of the nature of improvisation gleaned from other fields of study. On the other hand, Wilson and MacDonald’s (2012) findings as to how improvisers acquire improvisation skills illustrates a pervasive perception of improvisation as a mysterious proposition.
2.7 Mystery, Transcendence, and Flow

Several authors (Kenny & Gellrich, 2002; Nachmanovitch, 1990; Pressing, 1984; Sarath, 2002) have referred to altered states that improvisers experience while improvising. Pressing (1984) acknowledges that “nearly all improvisation traditions also proclaim the notion that completely new and unprecedented seed ideas sometimes spontaneously occur. The origin of such material is often ascribed to God, mysterious higher forces, or undefined transpersonal powers” (p. 351).

Elsewhere, Pressing (1984) describes the “uncanny feeling of being a spectator to one’s own actions” when improvising (p. 359). He ascribes this particular phenomenon to automatization, as certain cognitive tasks are so well practiced that they no longer require cognitive-specific or conscious attention. Similarly, Beaty (2015) raises the issue of the extent to which improvisations are controlled by the improviser, using existing literature to suggest the possibility that “improvisational expertise corresponds to decreased activity within executive control regions” (p. 109). Perhaps Berkowitz (2010) is best able to articulate this elusive quality of improvisation:

To use Levin’s words, the improviser who attempts to control automatic processes may “flail,” and the improviser who submits entirely to them may be led astray and “get nonsense.” The “letting go” to “accept a certain amount of disorder” thus implies a delicate balancing act between being a “creator” and a “witness.” (p. 149)

Sarath (1996, 2013) is interested in improvisation as a pathway to transcendence, which he describes as “a heightened awareness state in which interactive and inventive potential is enhanced” (1996, p. 14). This notion is explored in Nachmanovitch’s homage to improvisation, Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art. With improvisation comes a heightened awareness of the present. In this context, Nachmanovitch (1990) explains, the word “extemporization” means “both outside of time” and “from the time” (p. 18) so that in the moment, “the mind seems to float easily through the world” and “the mind feels strong and light” (p. 18). The goal of improvisation, Nachmanovitch believes, is to extend these moments into everyday life so that we experience a “moment-to moment non-stop flow” (p. 19).
Both Sarath’s and Nachmanovitch’s writings on transcendence are reflected in Mihayl Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) flow theory. Csikszentmihalyi & Asakawa (2016) describe this phenomenon as

the state in which a person becomes engaged in what he or she is doing to such an extent that all his attention becomes focused on the task and the rest of the world—with all of its problems and possibilities—no longer attracts attention. There is no attention left over to think about the past, or the future—all of the psychic resources are employed in experiencing the present. Usually after people experience this state they feel that they have lived life at its fullest, and they desire to repeat the experience again and again. (p. 5)

Psychologist Keith Sawyer (2006) has drawn on Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory in relation to his work on the emergent properties of group improvisation, coining the term group flow to describe the collective peak performance of performers (p.158). While Csikszentmihalyi’s flow theory relates to the conscious state of the individual performer, group flow refers to the emergent property of “interactional synchrony” (p. 158), which will be discussed in further detail below.

Kenny and Gellrich (2002) surmise that flow “may be one of the most important reasons that motivate improvising musicians to persevere with their craft” (p. 120). They further postulate that “flow states may therefore also play a key role in motivation and hence a predisposition or inclination toward further artistic development” (p. 120).

2.8 Social Interactions

As alluded to above, Sawyer (1998, 1999, 2006) has examined the interactive nature of improvisation. He asserts that, “even when analyzing improvisational music such as jazz, musicology has rarely considered musical processes during performance” (1998, p. 14) and that
psychologists’ focus on finished products, on tests of individual traits, or on extended interviews with creative individuals has often allowed us to simplify the messy complexity of the interactional and social processes that are so critical to the creative process. (1998, p. 17)

Drawing on his observations of theatre and music groups, Sawyer surmises

when a group is improvising together, the unpredictability of each participants’ performance also implies that the performance will be collaborative. Since each performer cannot know what the other performers will do, each has to listen and respond to the others, resulting in a collaborative, and intersubjectively generated, performance. (1999, p. 194)

Sawyer (2006) also notes that the collaborative nature of group improvisation is emergent. That is, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (p. 148). For example, group flow is an emergent property that “can inspire musicians to play things that they would not have been able to play alone, or that they would not have thought of without the inspiration of the group” (p. 158).

Seddon (2005) recalls Sawyer’s earlier writings to further articulate modes of communication during jazz improvisation. His analysis of six undergraduate jazz students yields observations regarding verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. Seddon advances the term empathetic attunement to describe the shared feeling of being “in the groove” (p. 57) that is experienced among jazz musicians while improvising. This emergent property is “a heightened state of empathy when improvisers go beyond responding supportively to their fellow musicians and stimulate the conception of new ideas” (p. 50). Empathetic attunement relies on decentralization, the ability to view situations from other’s viewpoints (p. 48):
During decentering, improvisers are not only concerned with their collective time-keeping role, they also strive to achieve a collective transparency of sound where each part is discernable. They seek complementary rhythmic activity of an appropriate density with the space made available to them by other musicians, and improvise melodies that will not obscure performance of the others. (p. 50)

This in turn stimulates the creation of new ideas. In other words, Seddon argues that empathetic attunement is a necessary prerequisite to group improvisation (p. 50).

The nature of collaboration in improvised settings is not only dependent on the performers, but also on the audience: “of particular relevance to improvisation is the degree to which listeners participate as the dynamic contributors rather than as passive bystanders to the music making” (Sarath, 2013, p. 209). Sarath believes audience members project “subtle information” as to their emotional and mental states, which performers can sense (p. 209). He further suggests that “where listener information unites with that of performers is in their capacity to contribute to the enlivenment and intensification of the field aspect of consciousness in transcendent states” (p. 209) as evidenced by “profound stillness, absence of fidgeting and coughing, or resonant movement and perhaps verbal displays of approval” (p. 215).

Ethnomusicologist David Borgo (2006) builds on Sawyer’s work to further examine the interactive nature of group improvisation. He agrees with Sawyer that the empirical study of group flow is challenging because it is not reducible: group flow “cannot be reduced to psychological studies of the mental states or the subjective experiences of the individual members of the group.” (p. 200). He continues, “What we need are new models operating at a different level. In the increasingly complex and interconnected world that we inhabit it is becoming apparent that structure and organization can emerge both without lead and even without seed” (p.3). Borgo proposes that these “new models” can draw inspiration from studying swarm intelligence (SI) and complex network models. “Network models…are increasingly able to take account of some of the rich dynamics that occur when individual components are not only doing something—generating power, sending data, even making decisions—but also are
affecting one another over time” (p.10). Similarly, swarm intelligence, “the collective behavior of decentralized, self-organized systems, natural or artificial” (Mahant, Choudhary, Kesharwani, & Rathore, 2012, p. 31), may lend itself well to describing the collaborative nature of improvisation.

Borgo (2006) draws on the work of Bonabeau, Theraulaz, and Dorigo to illustrate how SI is related to group improvisation. They identified four key ingredients of swarm behaviour: “1) forms of positive feedback, 2) forms of negative feedback, 3) a degree of randomness or error, and 4) multiple interactions of multiple entities” (p. 6). The way in which these four factors interact with each other is responsible for driving the improvisations. Positive feedback encourages generation of ideas by increasing “the ability of an improvising group to follow the more ‘promising’ of many concurrent ideas being pursued by various members” (p. 6). Negative feedback fosters the creation of new ideas as a way to combat fatigue— the prolonged repetition of an idea (p. 6). “Negative feedback helps to maintain a balance in the evolving improvisation so that one idea does not continue to amplify indefinitely” (p. 6). Randomness or unexpected results (errors) help to regulate the overuse of ideas and offer new sources of inspiration for musical material (p. 6). Lastly, multiple interactions of multiple entities speak to the notion that “individuals and the group as a whole benefit from multiple interactions and perspectives” (p. 6). Exploring the behavioural patterns of certain species of animals may offer new paths of understanding regarding the interactive nature of improvisation.

This foray into the nature of improvisation weakens Bailey’s (1980) assertion that improvisation is “too elusive for precise description” (p. 1). Pressing (1984, 1998a, 1998b) advanced our theoretical understanding of improvisation as an intricate series of cognitive functions. Researchers from other fields have subsequently investigated Pressing’s theories through neuroimaging, the study of language, interviewing and surveying improvisers themselves, and by examining the interactive nature of improvisation in group settings, lending credence to Pressing’s observation regarding the improvising musician:
The improviser must effect real-time sensory and perceptual coding, optimal attention allocation, event interpretation, decision-making, prediction (of the action of others), memory storage and recall, error correction, and movement control, and further, must integrate these processes into an optimally seamless set of musical statements that reflect both a personal perspective on musical organization and a capacity to effect listeners. (1998b, p. 51)

Moreover, Pressing’s description of the cognitive tasks involved in improvising counters perceptions that improvisation is at once both a whimsical and mysterious pursuit. Rather, improvisation involves a highly sophisticated series of actions that can be facilitated by deliberate practice of referents in the service of expanding one’s knowledge base. A large knowledge base encourages the automatization of some of the above-mentioned processes needed in improvisation, thereby allowing the improviser to allot more attention to higher order processes such as evaluating and generating musical ideas (Beaty, 2015, p. 109). This allocation of resources allows improvisers to narrow the distance between intended and actual output, which may result in absorbing or repurposing mistakes on purpose.

Yet Bailey’s assertion still holds true in certain respects. Consensus on a definition of improvisation is tenuous, leading to confusion, denunciation, and polarization. The extent to which improvisation is a function of conscious control is debatable. Recent research in the field of neuroscience attempts to answer whether or not certain aspects of improvisation are involuntary, and accounts of “out of body” experiences while improvising seemingly remain shrouded in mystery. Perhaps these out of body experiences with improvisation, sometimes framed as states of transcendence and flow, are by-products of automatization and empathetic attunement, a phenomenon in which collaboration fosters decentralization and emergence. Researchers continue to unravel complexity of the phenomenon of improvisation, however, turning to complex networks and swarm intelligence that parallel and inform our understanding of the emergent, and self-organizing properties of group improvisation.
The above descriptions of improvisation also underscore the notion that “improvisation appears to be a multidimensional concept” (Biasutti & Frezza, 2009, p. 240) and that “improvisation…is the kind of deep and complicated practice that will ultimately only be understood by the overlay of many different kinds of maps” (Alperson, 2010, p. 279). While there are clearly multiple views on this subject, I have tried to illuminate the salient features. The above examination of improvisation, however, informs several issues that arise when considering improvisation within the context of music education.

2.9 Improvisation: An Art Neglected in Practice

Despite the inclusion of improvisation in both the 1994 and 2014 versions of the Music Content Standards and repeated calls for the implementation of improvisation from such recognized music educators as Azzara (2002), Campbell (2009), Hickey (2009), Sarath (1993), Ward-Steinman (2007), research suggests that improvisation has not received widespread attention in current music education settings (Bell, 2003; Gagne, 2014; Orman, 2002; Schopp, 2006). Improvisation remains largely within the purview of elementary music classes and jazz ensembles at the junior high and senior high levels (Azzara 2002; Bartel, 2004b; Campbell 2009; Lehman 2008).

Accordingly, a significant amount of literature on improvisation in music education settings is dedicated to identifying and overcoming barriers associated with implementation. These include the need for clearer definitions, fear from both the perspective of students and teachers relating to issues such as lack of classroom discipline, lack of time, and lack of training (Byo, 1999; Kirkland, 1996; Koutsoudou, 2005; Niknafs, 2013b; Schopp, 2006; Whitcomb, 2013).

Azzara (1993, 2002) and Freer (2010) call for a clearer definition of improvisation in music education. This might abate perceptions of improvisation as a “vague and distant notion” (Campbell, 2009, p. 137). Kokotsaki (2011) affirmed this in a study in which student teachers readily endorsed creative music-making activities, but when asked to describe ways in which
they themselves fostered creative music-making, these same teachers seldom mentioned improvisation. In addition to a lack of models, Kokotsaki reasons the lack of emphasis on improvisation “might be a sign of confusion and lack of overt recognition of the importance of improvisation in the music classroom or at least of the distinctiveness of improvisation as opposed to composition” (p. 111).

Researchers have also examined students’ relationship to improvisation in music education settings. Campbell (2009) suggests that as children become “more aware of cultural rules, [they] feel less comfortable breaking them in creative ways” (p. 131). Accordingly, the prospect of engaging in improvisational activities which foster “the necessary disguising and making musical sense of mistakes” (Kenny & Gellrich, 2002, p. 120) may seem less than appealing to students. Wehr-Flowers (2006) examined the role of improvisation and self-perceived confidence among male and female jazz instrumentalists, noticing that female students reported lower levels of confidence than males. Alexander’s (2012) work with improvisation and string students both at the middle and senior high levels incorporates data collected by Wehr-Flowers. Yet the results of this study seemingly contradict the findings of Wehr-Flowers. No significant differences in confidence levels between males and females were noted. Alexander hypothesizes this could be because the improvisation curriculum implemented was designed specifically to “build confidence and allay fears toward improvisation” (p. 29) in all students rather than with regard to gender.

Research measuring teachers’ comfort with incorporating musical improvisation reveals perceptions that using improvisation may engender a chaotic classroom environment. As Niknafs (2013a) notes, music teachers may perceive students’ initial explorations with free improvisation as “chaotic” and “disorderly” (p. 33). Hickey (2009), however, cautions that using free improvisation does not mean that “all teachers...completely let go and allow classrooms to run by themselves” (p. 293). In this light, a perceived lack of structure may discourage teachers from employing improvisational strategies. Koutsoupidou’s (2005) survey of 67 specialist and non-specialist music teachers confirms this idea. Of the respondents surveyed, 62% indicated that
reduction of classroom discipline efficiency was a key reason for not using improvisation in the classroom. Hickey (2009) also cites this issue as a potential challenge.

Other research suggests that barriers to incorporating improvisation in the music education setting are linked to lack of instructional time (Koutsoupidou, 2005; Orman, 2002; Schopp, 2006). For example, Schopp’s (2006) survey of band educators from both middle schools and high schools revealed that many teachers felt that the demands of a performance schedule outweighed the time that could be devoted to improvisation (p. 104). Yet, this lack of time may be related to the priorities of a performance-based ensemble (Kirkland, 1996, p. 131). Perhaps an over-emphasis on performance goals does not leave enough time to explore improvisational strategies. Consider Inks’ (2005) opening remarks about the implementation of the National Standards of Music: “Most of us [music educators] plan lessons around the standards we are most comfortable with and conveniently run out of time for the ones that are more challenging” (p.22).

Similarly, music educators, though they may endorse improvisation in principle, are reluctant to incorporate improvisation in practice because they were not exposed to improvisation in their teaching education courses (Campbell 2009; Lehman 2008; Niknafs, 2013b) and had little experience with improvisation in their own training as musicians (Koutsoupidou, 2005; Whitcomb, 2013). Without models, teachers are hesitant to incorporate improvisation.

Accordingly, a large amount of literature dedicated to improvisation is focused on the role of pedagogy in relation to examining and mitigating barriers to improvisation. Subtopics of this broad category include confidence in implementing improvisation and teacher education. Several researchers have explored the degree to which music educators demonstrate confidence in implementing improvisation in music classrooms. Byo (1999) measured the difference in levels of confidence in delivering the standards between generalists and music specialists. Of the 177 teachers surveyed, both generalists and music specialists felt the least confident in their abilities
to teach improvisation. Similarly, Bell’s (2003) survey of 14 participants in a graduate course in music education reveals that this group of students identified Standard 3: improvising melodies, as “a difficult standard to implement” (p. 40). Ward-Steinman’s (2007) survey of 213 music teachers reveals that confidence levels with teaching improvisation decrease as the grade levels increase.

Bernhard (2013) and Bernhard and Stringham (2016) used Ward-Steinman’s (2007) Survey of Confidence in Teaching Improvisation (SCTI) to survey first 196, and then, in a subsequent study, 397 undergraduate music education majors. Results from both of these studies confirm those of Ward-Steinman (2007) in that confidence levels in teaching improvisation decrease with ascending grades, suggesting that more resources and instruction are needed for these teachers to be comfortable leading improvisation with older students (p. 71).

Other researchers have measured the degree to which exposing pre-service teachers to improvisation pedagogy would affect confidence in teaching improvisation. Pietra and Campbell (1995) used an ethnographic approach to follow two music teachers-in-training who explored improvisation techniques as a part of a secondary methods course. The results of the data suggest that improvisational skills can be learned by giving pre-service teachers opportunities to improvise music themselves. Similarly, Ward-Steinman (2007) used a survey to measure participants’ self-evaluation of their individual ability to improvise. The survey was administered at the beginning and at the end of the course to 13 music education majors who were enrolled in a six-week intensive vocal jazz workshop. A noticeable increase in perceived ability was evident in the results by the end of the course, suggesting that training can increase confidence in teaching improvisation. Watson’s (2010) study of 62 undergraduate instrumental music majors yielded similar results as Ward-Steinman’s work with pre-service teachers. Those students who had little to no exposure to jazz improvisation reported an increase in ability after receiving instruction. Hickey, Ankney, Healy, and Gallo (2016) measured 19 non-music majors’ confidence both before receiving group lessons in free improvisation and after, noting an increase in students’ confidence. The authors of this study conclude that “perhaps the first step
towards developing future music teachers’ confidence in teaching improvisation to their students is to develop confidence and self-efficacy in their own improvisation abilities” (p. 137).

Hickey (2015) attributes the relative lack of implementation of free improvisation in music education settings to a lack of knowledge about the methodology of free improvisation. This is the impetus for Hickey’s (2015) study of four pedagogues of free improvisation who teach at the post-secondary level. Finding commonalities among teaching approaches may shed light on how free improvisation could be utilized in music education settings. Hickey’s findings include themes related to strategies, pedagogic language, and negotiating new patterns of leadership that rely more on facilitation than authoritarian models. Accounts of teaching approaches seem to be an emerging trend in research related to improvisation in music education. Notable contributions in this category are Dove (2016), Schlicht (2007), Solis (2016), Stewart (2016), and Waterman (2010).

A recommendation commonly found in these above-mentioned studies and articles relating to mitigating fear of improvisation is the need to reform curricular offerings in both music education and post-secondary music degree programs (Azzara 2002; Hickey, 2009; Lehman 2008; Sarath 2002). The shift to including improvisation in music education, particularly at the tertiary level, is the impetus for a series of chapters found in Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom, (Heble & Laver, 2016), for example. Wright and Kanellopoulos’s (2010) narrative study of 91 pre-service teachers’ engagement with free improvisation yields interesting implications for training music educators. They assert that free improvisation can be a vehicle through which pre-service teachers not only establish their own identities as musical improvisers, but foster critical perspectives on teaching practices in music education.

The exclusion of improvisation in curricular offerings at the tertiary levels of music study only serves to perpetuate a cycle in which music teachers who did not study improvisation do not
offer their students improvisational experiences. Hickey, (2009) noting only a few post-secondary institutions offer courses in non-idiomatic improvisation, asks, “Where and how will future teachers learn to break the cycle? Is the university equipped to teach future music teachers how to facilitate free improvisation in music classrooms?” (p. 296). There is research to suggest that the answer to Hickey’s last question is “no.” Results from Stringham, Thorton, and Shevock’s (2015) survey of 321 university instrumental instructors reveals “a lack of priority for including composition/improvisation [C/I] in instrumental methods courses” (p. 21), prompting the authors of this study to conclude that “instructors of instrumental methods courses seemed no better prepared to teach C/I than K-12 teachers” (p. 22).

2.10 Improvisation in Choral Settings

Although studies of improvisation in traditional choral settings are not as pervasive as compared to studies in improvisation outlined in the previous section, researchers have explored several of the themes mentioned above, including teaching training and the implementation of improvisation. The results of Adderley’s (2000) study of choral music education faculty in South Carolina showed that improvisation is one of the areas faculty members identified as needing more attention in preparing future choral conductors. In Daley’s (2013) examination of five choral conductors trained in Dalcroze approaches, she asked if these conductors incorporated improvisation, considered to be a hallmark of Dalcroze pedagogy, into their choral rehearsals. Although the participants expressed interest in utilizing improvisation with their choristers, four of the five conductors reported improvisation was used minimally. Daley did not investigate the reasons for this, but one of the conductors volunteered that lack of time was one barrier to implementing improvisation.

The findings in Daley’s (2013) work shed light on another possible challenge to using choral improvisation in the choral setting, namely the size of choir membership. Some conductors work with large groups of people in a choral setting, possibly hindering opportunities for improvisation. These concerns are echoed by one of the participants in Daley’s study:
I think, in the choral ensemble, it’s tricky because obviously it’s difficult to have everybody doing it at the same time and have it sound like anything, so it’s not pandemonium. So, I have to keep experimenting with that, but I know I’m going to start with the rhythmic improv, then find some way, once I’ve set up that students feel safe, I can get them to do it in either small groups or solos. But to have 70 people do it at the same time is a little crazy. (p. 96)

Hickey (2015) raises the issue of large-group settings and improvisation as well. In her study of four pedagogues specializing in free-improvisation, she observed that these educators preferred working with groups of 20 or less. It is not uncommon for music educators of large ensembles, however, to work with groups ranging from 20-100 students.

With regard to examining choral improvisers from the perspective of choristers themselves, Hirschorn (2011) explored improvisation with a group of 35 middle-school choral students. Using a mixed methods approach, Hirschorn surveyed these students, and interviewed a sub-group of students at four stages of their experience during a course of 16 weeks of improvisation instruction they received in choir class. One chief aim of the study was to examine the relationship between improvisation and students’ own personal self-efficacy. Hirschorn defines self-efficacy as “one’s beliefs in their musical capabilities and musical competencies which we bring into new musical situations” (p. 4). The results of these surveys and interviews suggest that students’ levels of perceived self-efficacy increased: “Many participants frequently reported that improvisational language development and vocal range expansion were the result of ample opportunities to creatively explore the voice through daily improvisation” (p. 179).

Students’ conversations with two adult participant observers (referred to as Geri and Amelia) of this study yielded similar observations.

Geri spoke with several students who valued improvisation as creative freedom. One student described improvisation as the “freedom to create the rest of the melody,” which
Geri found very perceptive. Similarly, when asked how improvising feels, another student described it to Amelia as “free, joyful.” Other students described improvisation as a means to vocal development, pointing out the opportunities for voice range expansion. While talking to Amelia, one student stated, “It can help you explore your whole range, the high and the low parts. You can keep trying new things, and it’s always different.” Another student talked about “using their full range” or “a section of their range they don’t normally use.” (Hirschorn, 2011, pp. 141-142)

Accordingly, Hirschorn (2011) feels that “the relation of improvisation to vocal range expansion may be due, in part, to participants’ exercise of agency in freely working toward specific desired goals in vocal development” (pp. 179-180).

The existing literature on improvisation in choral settings affirms several themes previously explored with improvisation in music education settings: improvisation in choral settings is not widespread, more exposure to improvisation in teacher education programs is needed, and improvisation can be a vehicle for self-discovery and self-efficacy. Additionally, one source of research (Daley, 2013) suggests that working with large groups of choristers may hinder explorations with this educational tool.

2.11 Implementing Improvisation

While a lack of training and a lack of resources have been cited as common barriers to implementing improvisation, there are many resources available to music educators wishing to incorporate improvisation into the music education setting. These can be organized into 1) frameworks and overarching approaches and 2) strategies. The first category features writings regarding creativity, a hierarchical model of improvisation based on age, categorization of interactive modes of communication in improvisation settings, as well as general approaches to improvisation strategies themselves.
2.11.1 Frameworks for Improvisation

Several authors explore frameworks for creativity under which improvisation may flourish. Hickey and Webster (2001), Morin (2002), and Sawyer (1998) refer to the four stages of creative thinking that Graham Wallas proposed in 1926. During the first stage, called *preparation*, possible ideas, materials, and points of departure are assembled. The creative impulses marinate as the title of the second stage *incubation*, suggests. *Illumination* occurs when an idea emerges. The realization of this idea occurs in the fourth stage, *verification*. Using this framework may be helpful when considering timeframes and lesson plans involving improvisation.

Robinson, Bell, and Pogonowski (2011) propose a seven-stage model for engaging in creative music-making. They suggest that students be guided by first a springboard—a visual cue, perhaps, followed by open-ended questions that prompt students to realize the ideas that were generated using these catalysts. In step three of the process, students brainstorm ideas in a large group setting. Students are then directed to play with these ideas on an individual basis in the *personal exploration* stage. Students gather again to present their ideas in what the authors call *conducted and planned improvisation*. The authors suggest that these performances be recorded, which constitutes the sixth stage of this proposed model. Recording performances allows students to reflect on their ideas, leading to the final stage, *reflective analysis*. Students are given the opportunity to reflect on the success of their ideas and to revise them. It would seem that improvisation in this context is used as a gateway to composition. That being said, allowing students to reflect on their ideas, as well as engage in problem-solving activities, are paths of inquiry that would be equally suited to improvisatory activities.

Swanwick and Tillman (1986) developed a framework of improvisation based on their observations of children engaged in composing. While ostensibly this research pertains to composing, Burnard (2000a) argues that the term *composition* is often used in research to include improvisation, as is the case with Swanwick and Tillman’s study (p. 227). The researchers propose that children at a young age are pre-occupied with the sensory aspects of making sounds that the authors characterize as “unpredictable sound exploration” (p. 332). As the child reaches
four or five years of age, he/she begins to manipulate sound sources with some degree of control. At age five, students tend to reference structural building blocks, i.e., motives, rhythms, with both increasing repetition and predictability: “Here children seem to have entered the first stage of conventional music-making” (p. 332). The formulation of phrases and use of repetition are other emerging features of this stage. The speculative level is marked by forsaking references to structure in favour of increasing episodes of “imaginative deviation” (p. 332). This stage is most apparent with children aged 10. At the idiomatic level, children demonstrate elements of structural control and idiomatic gestures. This stage was linked to students aged 13-14. The symbolic stage is marked by students’ abilities to reflect on their work, and abilities to demonstrate both a growing sense of self-awareness, and an awareness of the aesthetic potency of music. These features, Swanwick and Tillman (1986) surmise, will not be fully developed until the age of 15.

Several authors (Brophy, 2001; Keyes, 2000; Mickolajak, 2003; Whitcomb, 2013) cite John Kratus’ taxonomy of improvisation in their discussions of improvisation. Kratus (1991, pp. 38-39) outlines seven stages of improvisation in the article “Growing with Improvisation.” During stages one and two, named exploration and process-oriented, students explore a range of possible sounds on instruments without any guidance. The sounds that are produced and developed in these stages are for private consumption.

Improvising within certain limits marks the third level of improvisation, product-oriented improvisation. At this stage and the following stages, Kratus explains, improvisations are meant for public consumption. As the title suggests, level four, fluid improvisation, describes students who are comfortable with improvising and have reasonable control over their instruments. The teacher’s role at level four is to provide technical guidance to students about efficient use of instruments and to provide the student with a broader range of improvisational opportunities.
Once students demonstrate such technical facility, they can move to activities in \textit{structured improvisation}. At this stage, students can draw on a variety of strategies, both musical and non-musical, to negotiate improvisational prompts. Students are also able to tailor these strategies to suit the fluidity of the improvisational environment. The next stage, \textit{stylistic improvisation} refers to improvising using idioms inherent to the style of music that is being explored. In this stage, students learn stylistic features of a particular genre of music, which facilitates a type of improvisation that would be an authentic representation of a predetermined style. The last stage, \textit{personal improvisation}, represents a student’s ability to create his/her own improvisatory style that is different from recognized approaches to improvisation. Kratus’s taxonomy may be helpful for understanding the challenges students may face if they are new to improvisation. It is also helpful in designing activities that are more in keeping with students’ abilities to improvise.

Pressing (1998a) outlines five broad approaches to improvisation. The first concerns improvisation as real-time composition to include notions of embellishment and variation, and the second involves adherence to patterns, models and procedures to produce stylistically correct products. Problem-solving forms the basis of the third approach, which is closely aligned to Dalcroze’s approach to music education. This approach recognizes creative potential within each individual and encourages individual expression by solving a series of musical problems (p.143). The fourth category capitalizes on imitation as the underlying basis for improvisation. The last category celebrates humanism (p. 144), emphasizing self-agency in individual and corporate settings.

Campbell (2009) offers a tri-partite description of improvisation in music education settings in her article, “Learning to Improvise Music, Improvising to Learn Music.” She uses the phrase “improvising to learn music” (p. 120) to describe how improvisation can be used as a teaching tool to enhance musical skills. In the second category, “learning to improvise music” (p. 120), musicians enlist improvisation as a way of understanding styles of music for which improvisation is an inherent feature, i.e., jazz (p. 120). The last category is perhaps the broadest. “Improvising music to learn” refers to improvisation as a lens through which musicians make discoveries about themselves and the world around them (p. 120). Theories of flow and
transcendence as well as Sawyer’s writings on the collaborative nature of improvisation may fit best under this category. While Campbell does not make specific reference to this phenomenon, free improvisation may be best aligned with this third type of improvisation. Pressing (1998a) describes free improvisation as “allied to the self-realisation of ideas of humanistic psychology” (p. 144). Similarly, of free improvisation Abramson (1980) muses, “students find music through their own movements, singing, and playing. Improvisation becomes a way of finding music for yourself and by yourself, a discovery rather than an imitation” (p. 62). On the other hand, students may discover, for example, their penchant for scat singing while improvising over a 12-bar blues chord progression, a type of improvisation that relies on clear and well-defined parameters. “Improvising music to learn” (Campbell, 2009, p. 120) is certainly not limited to freer forms of improvisation. It is also worthy of consideration that while Campbell’s framework comprises three lenses, that they are not necessarily meant to be isolated from each other. A student could learn about the chord structure of the 12-bar blues, while scatting, a stylistic feature of this type of jazz music, while at the same time experiencing a flow state, or feelings or exhilaration and confidence, corresponding to all three lenses that Campbell describes.

Coincidently, Higgins and Mantie (2013) propose a similar tri-partite structure to describe the role of improvisation in music-making situations that effectively summarizes Campbell’s writings:

1. as a component of a holistic view of musicianship (i.e., ability),

2. as an aspect of a situated form of musical practice (i.e., culture), and

3. as a distinct way of being in the world, embodying such qualities as risk-taking, reflexivity, spontaneity, exploration, participation, and play (i.e., experience). (39)

In any event, Campbell’s (2009) tri-partite framework for working with improvisation is appealing to music educators for a number of reasons. Firstly, for those educators who may feel intimidated or overwhelmed by working with improvisation, Campbell’s framework could be used as a foundational stepping stone to help them clarify their reasons for using improvisation
with their students; it certainly offers educators several rationales for implementing improvement. Secondly, Campbell’s framework reminds educators that the rationales for implementation are multifaceted and can target more than one outcome. Lastly, this framework accounts for various forms of improvisation with a lens that moves away from a focus on sequential or developmental and possibly hierarchal categorizations of improvisation to one that sees improvisation as a continuum that embraces a wide range of parameters and purposes. To that end, Campbell invites us to consider the intention for using improvisation, which then informs what type of improvisation strategy to implement with students. It is for these reasons that I chose to embed Campbell’s (2009) tri-partite model for improvisation throughout this study.

2.11.2 Developing an Improvisation Culture

A common thread throughout literature that explores how improvisation may be realized in music education settings concerns the environment under which improvisation can flourish. Lee Higgins (2008), an expert in community music-making in which improvisation plays a central role, refers to this as the “welcome” (p. 328): “this movement becomes a preparation for the incoming of the potential participant, generating a porous, permeable, open-ended affirmation of and for those that wish to experience creative music-making” (p. 328).

To establish an “improvisation culture” (Pignato 2013, p. 22), teachers foster a safe environment by acknowledging the risks involved in improvising with and for other students. The following description of such an environment is based on Pignato’s (2010) observations of music educators who use improvisation with their students:

Terry strives to create a “venue for improvisation” or a comfortable space where students are free of inhibition, are willing to “sound bad,” and know that they’ll be “supported more than anything else”… From the first lesson, she assures students that the music rooms are places where they can comfortably express themselves without fear of getting “voted off, ridiculed, or embarrassed.” (p. 139)
Creating a safe environment is also reflected in such phrases as “no-fault environment” (Shull, 2000) and “having an open mind” (Azzara 1999, p. 25). Other suggested guidelines include referring to improvisation exercises as “games” (Riveire, 2006) within an atmosphere that promotes a sense of play, and giving students the option to “pass” when exploring solo improvisational opportunities (Inks, 2005) and-or the option to use a “fallback pattern…in case of a musical emergency when rhythmic or melodic ideas do not necessarily come spontaneously to certain students” (Whitcomb, 2013, p. 49).

2.1.3 Strategies for Improvisation


Drawing on the phenomenon of Community Music established in the UK, the co-authors of the book *Free to Be Musical – Group Improvisation in Music*, Higgins and Campbell (2010) provide activities that use ostinatos, blues progressions, and poetry rhythms, as inspiration for improvisational opportunities. Unlike those mentioned in previous publications, these teaching ideas may be combined and sequenced in such a way as to develop and increase students’ abilities to improvise over a sustained period of time. Similarly, the *Jump Right In* series, developed by Grunow, Gordon, and Azzara (1999) offers a sequential approach to reading music
by utilizing a series of tonal pitch cells that are reinforced with audiation and improvisation prompts.

There are also suggestions in the form of strategies that help to generate and extend improvisation experiences such as Hickey’s (1997) SCAMPER strategy. Students can be directed to “substitute, combine, adapt or add, minify or magnify, eliminate, or reverse” ideas (Hickey, 1997, p. 19). These strategies help to equip students and teachers alike with possible solutions to problems that may arise when improvising, chief among them being how to foster ongoing music-making in this context.

Capitalizing on the idea that “repeated engagement with improvisation and borrowing ideas by attending to other people’s improvisations are the means by which improvisation generates its own future” (Wright & Kanellopoulos, 2010, p. 83), Agrell (2008), Waterman (2010) and Monk (2013) provide useful procedural knowledge concerning the interactive element of improvisation in group settings. Waterman’s (2010) reflections of teaching a university course in improvisation yielded such advice as “leave space and take space” (Liu quoted in Waterman, 2010, p. 4). Leaving space means to listen, rather than to play or sing, while creating space means to provide opportunities to promote the flow of musical ideas.

Monk (2013) sheds further light on these notions of leaving and creating space. Rather than make distinctions between “free” and “idiomatic” jazz, he explores the interactive nature of improvisation so that students “construct musical meaning collectively” (p. 77). This, Monk believes, is particularly useful for beginner improvisers who tend to assert their ideas without consideration of other players’ musical ideas, hence they miss improvisational opportunities that arise from playing with other members in the group. In essence, he offers strategies that enable and facilitate musical conversations.
Monk’s work is grounded in Sawyer’s (2006) research on improvising comedy troupes and the phenomenon of “emergence” (p. 148), the premise being that the overall creation is greater than the individual’s contributions in improvising comedy troupes. In order for creativity in a group improvised setting to flourish, Monk (2013) explains, actors agree on certain parameters: 1) do not block your partner, 2) do not contradict each other, 3) support the scene, and 4) individual goals are suppressed in favour of advancing the scene (p. 77).

Monk believes these parameters could equally apply to group improvisations. Accordingly, singing a phrase that is not relevant to what has come before may be considered “blocking” a participant. Likewise, playing in C major when the established key is A major is a contradiction of a parameter. These actions may result in pulling focus or stealing the scene, thereby contravening the collective goals of the improvising group.

Monk (2013) describes eight strategies that improvisers can use to realize the four parameters mentioned above in order to propel musical improvisations forward. These include: “copying, adapting, contrasting, punctuating, highlighting, supporting, signposting, and allowing” (p. 78). Students can copy another performer’s idea, adapt it by varying it, or create an idea that contrasts with the original idea. Students can punctuate another person’s ideas by filling in a thought, ostensibly offering a musical affirmation of the idea. Students may choose to highlight another person’s idea by playing, for example, the same rhythms but different pitches. This allows players to comment on what they believe to be pertinent features of a musical idea. Participants may play a supporting role by providing a musical framework such as an ostinato. This acts as a springboard from which other players can develop ideas. Signposting is the reiteration of an idea that was heard before in the creation that lends structural support for both the players and listeners. Finally, allowing occurs when students stop playing or provide minimal support so that other players can be featured for a time. Monk suggests that students practice these strategies both in individual and group settings. Monk asserts these strategies are “helpful tools for interaction that can be used in real-life improvisation” (p. 79).

- Learn to transform short motifs in a variety of ways.
- When you hear a good idea (either your own or someone else’s) support it or relate to it in some way.
- Silence is a very important part of interesting music. Don’t forget to rest at times. (Agrell, 2008, p. 271)

These suggestions serve to enhance improvisational strategies educators may wish to use with their students.

2.11.4 Strategies for Improvisation in Choral Settings

There are some examples of specific literature on the role of improvisation in the choral settings. A seminal publication is Madura’s (1999) *Getting Started with Vocal Improvisation*. Madura presents a clear and concise treatise on the role of improvisation in a variety of vocal/choral contexts, offering rationales and strategies for how improvisation in these settings may be realized.

An early example of advocating the use of improvisation in a choral setting is Alice Parker’s (1976) *Creative Hymn Singing*. In this manual, renowned choral composer, arranger, and conductor, Alice Parker, suggests the use of drones, canons, responses, and counter-melodies to create opportunities for improvisation when singing hymns, chants, and spirituals.

Two notable resources for facilitating circle-singing, a form of choral singing that is garnering increasing attention, are Treece’s (2015) *CircleSongs: The Method* and Stoloff’s (2012) *Vocal Improvisation: An Instru-Vocal Approach for Soloists, Groups, and Choirs*. Circle singing, as the name suggests, involves singers standing in a circle who improvise music together. This unique approach to music-making was developed by Bobby McFerrin. As Weir (2015) explains, in
circle singing, “repeating musical ideas are created and layered, one at a time, so the members of the ensemble can perceive each idea as it’s created and then add and organize other ideas around it” (p. 42). Another account of circle singing offers more details about this phenomenon:

Typically, the group facilitator will initiate a circle song by rote, offering a spontaneous musical idea (motif) to the entire group or designated singers. This is enhanced by using hand signals to demonstrate rhythmic pulse and/or melodic contour and it is typically chanted in unison or octaves depending on the ratio of male and female voices. This might be a 1-2 measure ostinato that loops until the facilitator decides to assign ancillary phrases…Additional motifs are offered to (or created by) other singers in the group and this process continues until 3, 4 or more parts are successfully launched. The primary objective of circle singing is to produce a vocally improvised piece that has musical integrity. This can be achieved a cappella or with instrumental accompaniment. Facilitators will also begin a circle song by first dividing the singers into sections similar to a choir, band or orchestra. In this case, designated or voluntary section leaders offer independent musical ideas that correspond musically to form a multifarious group composition. (VoiceCouncil, 2015)

Azzara (2008) presents a chapter on improvisation in the choral setting in *The School Choral Program—Philosophy, Planning, Organizing, and Teaching*. Azzara advises both the teacher and student to learn melodies by ear, as these songs will form the basis upon which elements such as melody and rhythms will be manipulated to generate improvisational ideas. In comparison to educational articles, this chapter format allows for more explanation of the process of improvisation to include step-by-step rendering of activities, diagrams of key concepts for improvising, and rubrics for assessment.

Both Bell (2004) and Frederickson (1994) draw on jazz idioms as a springboard for utilizing improvisation in traditional choral contexts. Frederickson outlines typical melodic phrases and scat syllables that singers could use with the 12-bar blues chord structure. Bell borrows the idea of “comping,” a short-hand form of accompanying that is typically employed by pianists in jazz
bands: “as a way of complementing the improvising soloist, the pianist plays quick, rhythmic chords that provide harmonic support” (p. 34). Bell suggests that for the secondary school choir, soloists could solo over a 12-bar blues chord structure while the choristers accompany the soloist by singing the chord tones, articulated in short rhythmic improvisational strategies.

In “Artistry Through Choral Improvisation in the Choral Rehearsal,” Williamson (2009) presents several introductory improvisation exercises that deliberately target non-jazz repertoire, arguing that improvisation need not be reserved only for jazz music. These improvisational activities incorporate ostinato patterns and chord clusters.

The majority of the articles discussed outline improvisation activities according to certain structural guidelines. This is somewhat ironic as Madura (1999) notes “that almost all of the choral literature that provides improvisation is aleatoric” (p.43). The list of choral repertoire featuring improvisation in Appendix K affirms Madura’s observation.

Authors of some articles, however, explore strategies with freer forms of improvisation that could serve as pre-cursors to choral compositions that feature aleatoric passages. Potterton (2015) utilizes an improvisation strategy that asks students to sing on a pitch of their choosing for eight counts in the tempo of their choosing. Ott (2015) describes an improvisation sequence based on a series of explorations in free improvisation with her university choir. Using chord clusters to promote dissonance, Riveire (2006) suggests that students experiment with singing tones outside of a given chord followed by reverting to the original chord. Yun and Willingham’s (2014) description of a choral project entitled JABBLE! details their use of free improvisation in a choral context. Choral students from three ensembles from the Wilfred Laurier Faculty of Music rehearsed and performed creations that relied heavily on aleatoric measures to generate musical material. Keyes (2000) refers to Kratus’s taxonomy (mentioned above) as well as his own score that utilizes graphic notation to explain strategies singers can use to explore aleatoric features. Other sources for strategies in working with aleatory measures can also be found in
Schafer’s (1986) *The Thinking Ear* and Madura’s (1999) *Getting Started with Vocal Improvisation*, in which she offers descriptions of several choral works that feature freer forms of improvisation, including Shafer’s (1973) *Miniwanka*.


### 2.11.5 Pedagogical Tensions in Music Education Settings

“Inevitably, teachers have their own personal and musical constructs that constitute improvising and composing, which in turn influence the content and activities they employ in the classroom” (Burnard, 2000a, p. 243).

While there is a general consensus that improvisation should be utilized in music education settings, agreement as to how improvisation should be taught is lacking. Some educators question the degree to which improvisational skills are actually being utilized and developed, even in contexts that claim to use improvisation: Lehman (2000) notes that instruction in improvisation at the early grade levels is often “nothing more than aural finger painting” (p. 5), arguing the need for a clearer and more rigorous approach to teaching improvisational skills. Shull (2000) states that “true improvisation is not simply spontaneous” (p. 68) and that teachers must provide context and initial strategies to aid in the generation of ideas (p. 68). The implication is that attempts to implement improvisation in the classroom have at best been undirected and at worst, not approximated improvisation at all. Azzara’s (1993) critiques are similar: “Spontaneous performance is not the expression of aimless, random tonal and rhythmic patterns” (p. 330). Rather, improvisation is “the meaningful manipulation of tonal and rhythm
music content created in ongoing musical thought” (p. 330); “improvisation means that an individual has internalized (can audiate) a music vocabulary and is able to express intended musical ideas spontaneously” (1991, p. 108). Elsewhere, Azzara (2002) notes the superficiality of improvisation as taught in most schools, contending that “in most cases, comprehensive improvisation skill development is absent from music curricula” (p. 171). Perhaps these authors wish to distinguish between what Kratus (1991) would call “exploratory improvisation” and subsequent stages of improvisation that demonstrate increasing levels of cohesion and fluency (p. 38). In any event, there seems to be a bias against free explorations of sound in favour of structured improvisational strategies.

Coleman’s (1922) views on improvisation both affirm and contradict those mentioned above. On the one hand, she seems to advocate for structured forms of improvisation: “One’s own improvisations in dancing, as well as singing and playing must reach towards ideals of form, balance and simplicity, and must lead to a sane expression and appreciation of art” (p. 90). On the other hand, as Pignato (2010, p. 3) points out, free exploration was encouraged by Coleman (1922): “It was not my aim to bring out anything of artistic value in the beginning, but merely to give the child freedom in letting his song flow and to have him realize how easy improvisation is and feel no constraint in attempting it” (p. 123). Coleman seems to be advocating for structured forms of improvisation while acknowledging that free improvisation is a necessary step towards developing improvisation skills. In this regard, Coleman (1922) anticipated concerns regarding improvisation pedagogy that several music educators would raise almost a century later.

There are those who question the notion of “teaching” improvisation. Gordon does not believe improvisation can be taught: “just as only a vocabulary of words, not thinking, can be taught, all a teacher can do is provide students with the necessary readiness to teach themselves how to improvise” (Gordon, quoted in Madura, 1999, p. 19). Hickey (2009) endorses this sentiment in “Can Improvisation Be ‘Taught’?: A Call for Free Improvisation in Our Schools”: “True improvisation cannot be taught—it is a disposition to be enabled and nurtured” (p. 286). She believes that improvisation, as it is currently being taught, is overly structured, which can “hinder the growth of creative musical thinkers” (p. 286). Coleman (1922) voiced similar concerns.
warned against stifling children’s natural predilections towards improvisation: “Children, too have this power [i.e., to improvise] in their early years, but it often becomes atrophied from disuse or blocked by too much formality in their training” (p. 177).

While ultimately, Hickey (2009) is arguing for a balance of structured and non-structured improvisation strategies, she believes that an overly-structured approach contradicts the very nature of improvisation: “What we claim to be ‘teaching’ as improvisation in schools is not true improvisation” (p. 286). Using the evaluation criteria for improvisation established by NAfME (then called MENC) as an example, Hickey posits that teachers guide students via a carefully delineated path, which ensures a successful outcome; for example, melody patterns that conform to harmonic underpinnings. She also cites Orff and music books by Azzara and Gordon as having “similar question-answer approaches to improvisation with a clear sense of a ‘correct’ answer for success” (p. 291).

These structured approaches to improvisation instruction are, in Hickey’s view, problematic. Firstly, they leave little room for input from students. Improvisation is seen as a means to an end where students are expected to produce creations that are similar to teachers’ examples. Secondly, Hickey rejects the assumption that “building blocks are necessary prerequisites to successful improvisation” (p. 293). Rather, Hickey proposes a model of learning that begins with developing an “improvisatory disposition” (p. 292) that embraces free improvisation instead of a more traditional approach to teaching improvisation that often favours experiences in structured forms of real-time music creation.

Integral to Hickey’s assertions is that a new role for the teacher emerges, that of a facilitator, defined by “teaching in terms of enculturation through exposure to cultural exemplars, and the subsequent development of a disposition to understand” (p. 286). Campbell’s (2009) views on the role of the teacher accord with Hickey’s: “the vast store of musical information that builds from infancy onward requires the stimulation, motivation, and nurturing facilitation of a strong
model, mentor, and/or master teacher to help novice musicians and musicians-in-progress tap into the treasure-load of sound sources” (p. 124).

Burnard (2000a, 2000b, 2002) believes students in improvising situations should be given opportunities to make decisions, and they should construct their own understandings of improvisation. Her views on improvisation are underpinned by the premise of children as inherent improvisers. In this light, perhaps, as Campbell (2009) suggests, “improvisational behaviours in music appear to be a musician’s release of musical ideas, impulses, and gestures that may have arrived to improvising musicians by way of their everyday living in the world” (124).

Burnard’s (2002) research on improvisation with children also challenges Kratus’s (1991) taxonomy that presupposes that “children were unable to carry out an improvisation because they had not reached the right stage of their musical development” (p. 169). As such, improvisational parameters are not meant to be dictated by the teacher; rather, improvisational events are the results of children’s interactions with and responses to in-the-moment creations. Like Hickey (2009), Burnard believes that “our aim as music educators should be to facilitate a form of music education that focuses on genuine experiences of children being improvisers and composers rather than acting out a pre-determined model” (Burnard, 2000b, p. 21).

In his discussion of structured improvisation verses free improvisation in music education settings related to his own approach to improvisation with his students, Hirschorn (2011) reconciles these opposing points of view represented by Burnard and Kratus:

Teacher who utilize Kratus’s approach will establish learning goals which reflect an outcome expectation for a child’s improvisational level, whereas Burnard’s approach values improvisation as an inherent expression of innate creativity...In practice, this study utilized a balanced approach to these positions, one which viewed improvisation as a developmental skill, yet valued all exploratory attempts. (p. 34)
Evaluation presents other problems for music educators wishing to use improvisation. Depending of the nature of improvisation used, it may be difficult to establish outcomes that can be measured, let alone translated into numeric values.

Reticence toward improvisation is exacerbated by educational policies that demand clearly defined and measurable outcomes, often in the name of teacher accountability. The open-endedness and unpredictability of activities not designed toward a predetermined product (improvisation) would seem antithetical to how many people have come to think of schooling and education. How does one adequately demonstrate to administrators and other stakeholders in education the value of process? Of seeking? Of exploration? (Higgins & Mantie, 2013, p. 39)

Hickey (2009) surmises that “we will have to change our concepts of what is ‘good’ or ‘not good’ when faced with assessing the [free-improvisation] activity” (p. 295). Furthermore, how might the evaluation of students’ improvisations influence students’ creative agency? Will students feel free to respond or will their creations be guided by how they think they should sound in order to a) please the teacher and b) earn a good mark?

Other music educators explore improvisation as a tool for demonstrating student learning. Whitcomb (2013) suggests that improvisation could be added to Kodály’s prepare-present-practice sequence of introducing a concept. Having students improvise would reveal their ability to apply the concept in a new situation. In short, improvisation could be used to assess students’ understanding of targeted concepts. This seems to mirror notions about the use of improvisation in aural skills classes articulated by Covington (1997) and Santos and Ben (2004), who argue that improvisation serves as a synthesis of targeted concepts that students can present. Several sources—NAfME (2014), Shull (2000), Agrell (2008) and Robinson et al. (2011)—advocate recording improvisations for assessment purposes. Higgins and Mantie (2013) propose written pre and post reflections as a possible avenue for evaluation of learning.
2.11.6 Rethinking the Choral Paradigm

Implementing improvisation in traditional choral settings may yield its own pedagogical tensions. A review of the literature on improvisation in a choral context reveals challenges that choral conductors will most likely confront. These challenges destabilize traditional notions of the conductor’s role. Yun and Willingham (2014) noted that the role of the conductor shifted from that of authoritarian to co-conductor, coach, and “producer” (p. 243). Likewise, Freer (2010) suggests that the lines between leader and follower may become blurred in improvisation activities:

Conductors will be more comfortable with collaboration’s tradeoffs who are less motivated by attaining a perfect performance end-product than by practicing a pedagogy that fosters the skills and the empowerment of the singers as individuals. Naturally, then, it will be those conductors who have already relaxed their dependence of the authoritarian model who are better predisposed to exploring the incorporation of improvisation into their programs. (p. 27)

Similarly, Robinson et al. (2011) write, “the effective teacher of creative strategies perceives himself or herself as an equal member of the learning community, not the sole giver of information” (p. 52).

It may not, however, be possible to achieve the type of equality to which Robinson et al. (2011) allude. Higgins (2008, 2012) points out that there is a tension between the notion of equality and leading improvisational activities. “There is a fine line between leading and controlling” (2012, p. 148): “the workshop leader [in this case the conductor] wishes for unconditional openness, but the structure itself is only possible within limits, resources, time, skill, etc.” (2008, p. 328).

Re-negotiating this line is certainly one challenge that choral instructors will have to consider when incorporating improvisational strategies. The literature suggests this can be realized in
several ways. One approach is to reconfigure the choral rehearsal set-up when engaging in improvisational activities. Typically, the conductor is at the front of the room, facing the choristers who typically sit in rows. Robinson et al. (2011) suggest that teachers move away from the “sage on the stage” approach to a “guide on the side” approach (p. 52) with their students. Similarly, Countryman (2009) suggests that conductors move away from the podium, “a symbol that represents power, hierarchy, and sole expertise” (Kerchner, 2003, p. 113), and explore a circular formation. Waterman and Jackson (2010) share similar views: “A circle in which everyone is playing provides a model for a democratic social group, and such social cohesion is a beneficial aspect of good improvisation workshops” (p. 9). Having the conductor sit in the circle might be a tangible sign of the shift in power from conductor to choristers.

Waterman and Jackson (2010) suggest another way this shift in power can be realized is to allow students opportunities to lead improvisational activities (p. 7). With the incorporation of improvisation, choral rehearsals may be viewed as a “laboratory for music” (Joio et al., 1968, p. 23), a workshop situation, where “the workshop space becomes a site for experimentation and exploration within an environment that is deterritorialized” (Higgins, 2008, p. 329).

Several scholars have discussed other traditionally embraced aspects of the choral conductor’s role that come into question when considering improvisation. As Freer (2010) states, “For conductors accustomed to seeking a faithful, “correct” rendering of scores, the situational and contextualized nature of vocal improvisation challenges the traditional, rigid structure of conductor-centered ensembles” (p. 22). In an effort to achieve note accuracy, we listen for errors, suggest ways to correct them, and then execute these suggestions. This mode of communication, however, may not be suited to improvisation, a form of music-making that invites and embraces cognitive (and sonic) dissonance. A participant in Pignato’s (2010) study recalls reminding a student teacher that when working with improvisation in a class setting, “error detection is no longer the way to drive your teacher activities” (pp. 139-140). In broader terms, “conductors may sense, understandably, tension between the identifiable correctness of musical re-creation and the ambiguous correctness of spontaneous music creation” (Freer, 2010, p. 21).
Moreover, choral conductors of performance-driven programs wishing to utilize improvisation will have to confront the issue of time allocation during rehearsals. A common approach in traditional choral rehearsals is to move through material in an efficient manner (Apfelstadt, 1989; Garretson, 1993; Leck & Jordan, 2009; Shively, 2004). “This teaching approach is based on the ability to correct performance problems as quickly as possible” (Shively, 2004, p. 182). On the other hand, Shull (2000) suggests that students receive “ample time to experiment” with improvisation (p. 68). How, then, can choral educators balance time for improvisation with the time needed to meet the performance goals of the ensemble? Results from Schopp’s (2006) survey of 243 band educators suggest that the warm-up may help mitigate this dilemma. He notes that those conductors who used improvisation in their band programs tended to use improvisation at the beginning of their rehearsals. Likewise, Snow and Apfelstadt (2002) suggest the choral warm-up as an ideal time to use improvisatory strategies (p. 211).

As alluded to above, evaluation has been cited as another challenge for teachers wishing to incorporate improvisation in their choral classrooms. Azzara (2008) and Madura (1999) present rubrics to evaluate improvisation. Azzara’s rubric measures the extent to which the improviser utilizes and develops musical ideas within stylistic, rhythmic, and harmonic parameters. Madura’s Vocal Jazz Improvisation Measure measures similar parameters with the addition of vocal technique and quality categories. Notably, with the exception of Madura’s additions, both rubrics orient their categories of evaluation toward structured forms of improvisation. Madura suggests, however, that her rubric can be adapted to suit a variety of improvising contexts. Also common to both rubrics is the use of qualitative descriptors such as “correctly” (Azzara 2008, pp. 230–231) and “poor,” “weak,” “fair,” “good,” and “excellent” (Madura, 1999, p. 60). As Hickey (2015) noted in her observations of four pedagogues who facilitate free-improvisation ensembles, these instructors avoided qualitative statements when providing feedback to the students. Some educators may find the qualitative language problematic, as well as assigning a numeric value to students’ efforts as in both Azzara and Madura rubrics. On the other hand, the recently updated National Standards of Music (NAfME, 2014) invite both the student and teacher to generate criteria upon which to evaluate improvisation. Accordingly, Madura’s and
Azzara’s rubrics provide a number of criteria that choristers and choral educators alike may find useful when generating their own rubrics.

Using improvisation may challenge conductors’ gestural patterns, particularly if conductors wish to use free improvisation in rehearsals. Yun and Willingham (2014) found that using traditional choral gestures which emphasize beats and phrase shapes were unsatisfactory in conveying the nature of the music that was produced through aleatoric measures. They needed a new set of gestures. It would appear that these authors were referring to conduction:

Conduction (conducted improvisation/interpretation) is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or compositions. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation by the individual and the collective, to provide instantaneous possibilities for interpretation by the individual and the collective, to provide instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing, or form. (Morris, n.d., quoted in Schlicht, 2007, p. 7)

If conductors increasingly embrace improvisation as a teaching tool, they will likely need instruction in conduction.

Using improvisation, particularly free improvisation, in choral settings could have implications that extend beyond the choral rehearsal. Should improvisations be performed in public concerts? Improvised performances, particularly those that feature free improvisation, may challenge audience expectations.

The sounds of a free improvisation session, if truly free, do not necessarily produce an “aesthetically pleasing” product, and are certainly something an audience of parents may not understand, much less enjoy. Though it has been debated whether free improvisation should be intended for audience consumption as much as it is for the participant, this remains perhaps the single issue that may hinder our product-oriented school music
programs from moving toward the more free end of the continuum. (Hickey, 2009, p. 295)

Bobby McFerrin raises similar concerns regarding circle singing. When asked how he would like audiences to approach listening to these creations he responds:

Well certainly with open ears and patience. A lot of patience because sometimes it takes a while to work these things out. We meander quite a bit. The searching process can be very long, so it demands a lot of patient listening. (Gable, 1997)

While the use of improvisation in choral settings has many benefits, it is clear that incorporating these types of activities poses challenges for the audience, choristers, and conductors. Key to these challenges is mitigating fear—fear of taking risks, fear of lack of control, and fear of change.

2.12 Summary

This literature review has shown improvisation to be a complex phenomenon, whose very definition is charged with precarious socio-political connotations that obfuscate a clear understanding and effective implementation. While Bailey’s (1980) assertion that “improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood” (p. 1) is still invoked today, research from various fields of study—ethnomusicology, cognitive psychology, education, and phenomenological accounts of jazz musicians in solo and ensemble settings, for example—has helped to debunk notions that improvisation is a mysterious art-form entrusted to only a certain talented few.

A number of scholars have also noted that in music education, improvisation is overlooked, save in certain elementary music contexts and vocal jazz and instrumental jazz programs. The
research suggests that a number of factors, including a lack of understanding as to what constitutes improvisation, fear, lack of training, and time constraints, are barriers for including improvisation in certain music education settings.

A small but growing literature, further engages with other barriers to improvisation that are unique to choral settings. Improvisation threatens tenets of the traditional choral paradigm with regard to the role of the conductor, as well as an emphasis on product-oriented modes of learning and performing that typify many choral classrooms. Even those choral educators who are in favour of process-oriented modes of learning will still struggle with meeting performance demands while incorporating improvisation. As well, the large size of choral ensembles may also be prohibitive.

Yet improvisation is consistently lauded by researchers for its educational import. Recalling Campbell’s (2009) tri-partite structure, improvising music reinforces musical building blocks that underscore written music and facilitates musical conversations (“improvising to learn music”). Improvisation is central to many forms of music-making that are often featured in choral programs. If we are meant to understand a variety of music we must be willing to engage in the practices associated with these genres (“learning to improvise music”). Improvising is another avenue for expression that encourages autonomy, problem solving, evaluation, risk-taking, and self-efficacy (“improvising music to learn”). The inclusion of improvisation in the NAfME standards as well as Canadian music curriculum documents (Alberta Education, 1991; Gouvernement du Québec, 2004; Government of Manitoba, 2015; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1996; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, n.d., Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2002; New Brunswick Department of Education, 2002; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; PEI Department of Education, 1997; Province of Nova Scotia, 2015; Saskatchewan Education, 1997), albeit in varying degrees, is also a ringing endorsement of improvisation’s educational value.
Furthermore, it is clear that for many scholars, improvisation is seen as a way to mitigate problematic features of the rehearsal model that typify many choral education settings. Students who have had little formal musical training may have trouble accessing ensembles at the upper levels of school. Improvisation, however, allows for immediate inclusion regardless of musical training. Students with limited formal training, can, for example, create a melody with one or two notes, or a rhythmic pattern by employing body percussion. Improvisation invites students to move away from recreation of the notated score and to listen and work with each other in ways that promote choral cohesion. Improvisation also destabilizes the hierarchical structure of choirs, highlighting individual expression and contributions and allowing for a more democratic approach to music-making.

Opinions as to what types of improvisation and how improvisation should be utilized in music education settings are clearly divided. Some educators favour idiomatic improvisation which promotes the internalization of a music vocabulary based on scales, rhythms, structures, and other musical patterns. Others advocate for the use of free-forms of improvisation, arguing that free improvisation allows students to truly author and express their own individual musical thoughts in ways that structured improvisation does not. Hickey (2009) reminds us to consider a balance of these approaches to improvisation. Regardless of these approaches, providing students with meaningful educational experiences lies at the heart of music education and should be a primary consideration when deciding on which type of improvisation strategy to use.

While the research presented here points to resources for and barriers to implementing improvisation, little research into how these barriers are mitigated and how these resources are introduced and facilitated exists, particularly in choral contexts. One notable exception to this finding is Hirschorn’s (2011) study, which places an emphasis on students’ perspectives as they relate to improvisation in the choral setting. Accordingly, Gagne (2014), Hickey (2015), and Lehman (1995) emphasize the need for further research on the work of those teachers who utilize improvisation with their students in order to better understand how improvisation can be utilized and facilitated. Hirschorn’s (2011) study includes his reflections of teaching improvisation to his
choral students. As well, Pignato’s (2010) case study presents insights from two music educators whose teaching assignments included some choral music.

Even with this emergent work, a review of the literature suggests that little research has been conducted with choral educators who routinely utilize improvisation with their choral students. Inspired by the staunch advocacy of so many scholars for improvisation in a variety of settings, not the least of which is education, and the awareness of the work of a few choral conductors that are actively using improvisation in their teaching, I aim to fill that very gap through this dissertation.
Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Overview

This study, which explores the phenomenon of improvisation in choral settings, is guided by the following questions:
1) Why should improvisation be used in choral settings?
2) How can improvisation be used in choral settings?
3) What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings?

3.2 Research Design

This study is underpinned by a qualitative research design that embraces a constructionist point of view in which “human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty quoted in Creswell, 2014, p. 9). The qualitative researcher seeks to unearth the unique and subjective views of the subjects being examined, relying “as much as possible on the participants’ view of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). From this perspective, a research design that involves observing and interviewing participants about their use of improvisation seemed an optimal way to examine the phenomenon of improvisation in choral settings.

Accordingly, I employed a multi-case study featuring three choral educators who routinely use improvisation with their students. The case study seemed most suited to the thrust of this research because of its ability to “convey the particularity and complexity that attends a phenomenon of interest” (Barrett, 2014, p. 114). Furthermore, as strategies for implementing improvisation rely, in part, upon the conditions in which improvisation occurs in choral settings, the case study aptly addresses these lines of inquiry: “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the
boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2002, p. 13). In particular, adopting a multiple-case methodology offered opportunities for “more compelling” evidence and therefore for a “more robust” study as compared to the single-case study (Yin, 2002, p. 46). Lastly, the case study is often utilized in music education for “multiple accounts of concrete, context-based knowledge, crucial in forming collective expertise and professional knowledge to inform teaching and learning” (Barrett, 2014, p. 120). My intention is that the findings of this study will help to inform professional practice.

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 Sample Method

Using convenience sampling, I invited three choral music educators, each of whom uses improvisation in their teaching, to participate in this study. Although this method of participant selection is sometimes considered less than ideal (Patton, 2002, pp. 241–242), research suggests that improvisation in choral settings, particularly at the secondary and post-secondary levels, is an infrequent occurrence, thereby limiting the pool of participants upon which to draw.

I pre-interviewed each of the participants to assess their viability for this study, the criterion for selection being that they were choral music educators at the secondary or post-secondary levels and that they routinely incorporated improvisation in their choral rehearsals.

3.3.2 Data Collection

I collected data during the 2015-2016 academic year. Types of data included six semi-structured audio-recorded interviews lasting approximately 60-80 minutes each, field-notes gleaned from on-site observations of eight rehearsals, video footage of 11 rehearsals, informal observations, e-mails, and informal conversations. I conducted two additional interviews lasting 10 to 20 minutes each with one of the participants because the altered timeline for data collection (see below) allowed opportunities to clarify a few issues and questions in person.
I used several instruments to collect data. Where possible, I video recorded rehearsals using a Canon FS200 camera. I did not, however, video record rehearsals of the third participant myself. This participant used a ZOOM video recorder to record her rehearsals with the students and sent the footage to me via Dropbox. While the focus of the video recordings was on the participants themselves, it was inevitable that students were recorded on this footage as well. This is due in large part to the use of circular formations that students were directed to use when engaging in improvisation strategies. Other examples of video recording technology that I employed when I was not on-site include Skype and an iPhone 4S. Here again, while the focus of this study was on the participants themselves, during the Skype sessions, two of the participants positioned their computers so as to capture examples of students singing, sometimes moving the computer to different areas of the rehearsal room.

I also employed audio recording devices to collect data, in part, as a back-up resource for the video footage I had taken. I also recorded the first two participant rehearsals using a ZOOM H4 audio recorder. I conducted on-site interviews with each participant using a ZOOM H4 audio recorder, an iPhone 4S, and, in one instance, the Windows Voice Recorder app as this was the most reliable recording tool available to me at the time. I conducted off-site interviews via telephone, using ZOOM H4 to record these conversations. These video and audio recordings helped to confirm, clarify, and extend observations and questions I had recorded in the field notes that I had taken on my laptop computer during rehearsal observations and interviews with the participants.

3.4 Methodology and Timeline

3.4.1 Initial Contact

Between March and November 2014, I emailed three choral music educators, each of whom uses improvisation in their teaching, asking them to participate in this study. I introduced myself and described the purpose of the study. These teachers came to my attention either through
publications, recommendations from colleagues, or through personal-professional connections. I knew one of the participants as a professional colleague. The other two participants I knew by reputation only. Because relatively few choral conductors seem to use improvisation in choral rehearsals (except perhaps with vocal jazz ensembles), I did not have a large pool of subjects from which to choose and therefore could not use random sampling. Two of the subjects (hereafter called “John” and “Beth”) teach at the university level in different states of the U.S. southeast, the third (“Sarah”) teaches at a high school in a western Canadian province.

3.4.2 Pre-Interview Conversations

After my initial e-mail, I then phoned John and Beth to discuss further their interest in participating in the study. Because I happened to be in the same province as Sarah, I was able to talk with her about her research involvement in person. These conversations acted as informal pre-interviews, helping me determine the potential subjects’ views about improvisation and their beliefs in the importance of it as a tool in the choral setting. I was also interested in knowing about how often they used improvisation and whether or not they had prior training that might have encouraged them to use it.

I requested of each participant the time to observe and record three choral rehearsal observations and to conduct two interviews, one prior to the observations and one following them. My plan was to observe the teachers early in the year and then again, by Skype, at a later time, in hopes of observing differences and similarities in initial versus later experiences.

3.4.3 On-site Interviews and Observations

Because school started in late August in the two universities, I was able to meet with John and Beth at the end of August 2015. They live in contiguous states so it was convenient for me to see them within a close timeframe. Sarah’s high school did not begin classes until after Labor Day in September, however, and she did not introduce improvisation until later in the month, so my
third observation/interview cycle was delayed until the end of September. (For a full listing of all steps in the process, see Appendix F.)

In addition, because of a very prolonged ethics review process for the school board that oversees Sarah’s school, it was necessary for me to begin observing her on an informal basis. Operating under the belief that permission granting was a formality, we unfortunately experienced unexpected delays. Sarah’s administration and colleagues knew of my interest in her work and indeed were aware of the fact that she was considered an expert in the use of improvisation, as she frequently does workshops for other school districts, but it was not until spring that I had the official permission in hand due to an unanticipated prolonged review process. I then supplemented information gleaned from my initial informal observations in the fall with on-site follow-up observations of classes seen earlier. This explains why in Appendix F there are more observations listed for Sarah than for the other two subjects.

I sent the participants a set of questions to consider before we had our first formal interviews together (See Appendix B). This enabled the participants to focus their thoughts before we talked. While they responded verbally, I recorded and took notes on my laptop. My main purpose was to establish the subjects’ background, familiarity and perceptions about using improvisation in choral settings, delving into these more deeply than in the initial conversations we had had prior to their committing to the study.

On-site rehearsal observations took place in the participants’ rehearsal spaces. I sat at the back of each room where I could see and record but would be out of direct sight-line of the students. The teachers introduced me simply as a visiting conductor who was there to observe rehearsals. In the case of John and Beth’s situations, I observed two rehearsals of the same group within a three-day span, and followed those up with Skype observations of the same ensembles about six to eight weeks later. Where possible, I audio- and video-recorded these Skype sessions. In Beth’s
case, because there was an unavoidable technical malfunction with the Skype observation, I had to see a fourth rehearsal to replace the aborted one.

3.4.4 Follow-up Rehearsal Observations

The purpose of viewing subsequent rehearsals was three-fold. First, observing more than one rehearsal provided deeper understanding of how each of the subjects used improvisation in the choral setting. Second, the subjects may have used different strategies for implementing improvisation in subsequent rehearsals, resulting in a more comprehensive compendium of strategies (See Appendices G, H, and I). Third, I was interested in seeing how the subjects facilitated improvisation with their students as they became more familiar with it. How would the singers respond after the initial experiences? How did the subjects engage their students further after those first attempts at improvisation? How did they mitigate issues such as fear, varying abilities of students, and different sizes of ensembles?

3.4.5 Second Interviews

After reviewing footage of rehearsals and the transcripts of initial interviews, I formulated questions based on my observations of the subjects’ work in order to clarify and extend points of interest that arose in the first interviews and to verify information regarding the context of the choral settings within which they work (See Appendix C, D, and E). These questions formed the basis of the second or follow-up interviews which I conducted by telephone with the subjects, lasting approximately 60 to 80 minutes each. With John and Beth, I did those interviews about 10 weeks after the final Skype rehearsal observation. After transcribing the interviews, I sent them to John and Beth for verification in the spring of 2016.

In the case of Sarah, with the research protocol approval delays, I could not keep to the same kind of timeframe as with John and Beth, and the observations, interviews, and final transcript approval took place over the entire school year. While this represents a change from the other two, I included the same basic components in the research design. (In Appendix F under Data
Collection for Sarah, there is mention of two “follow-up interviews with Sarah on site;” these were very brief exchanges for clarifying minor details only.) The opportunity to observe a teacher working with younger students and in a different sociological context was too valuable to discard; therefore, I chose to keep the data from Sarah and include it in the final report. In addition, as a Canadian researcher, I felt it was important to have one Canadian representative in the subject pool.

I do not feel that that this deviation from the time frame for the collection of data in Sarah’s case, however, compromises the trustworthiness of this study for several reasons. Firstly, consistency, considered to be one of the pillars of trustworthiness as advanced by Guba (1981) refers to “whether the findings would be consistent if the study were to be replicated” (McGloin, 2008, p. 52). The time frames among the participants are similar, with the exception of my last observation of Sarah. The use of triangulation mitigates this issue as I relied on several sources of data to verify my observations, leading me to conclude that similar results would have likely emerged were this study replicated. Secondly, Guba (1981), considered an authority on trustworthiness in naturalistic inquiry, notes that

for the naturalist, the concept of consistency implies not invariance (except by chance) but trackable variance…the naturalist thus interprets consistency as dependability, a concept that embraces elements both of the stability implied by the rationalistic term reliable and of the trackability required by explainable changes in instrumentation. (p. 81)

Moreover, Bresler (2005) reminds us that “because qualitative research focuses on naturalistic settings and embraces emerging issues, improvisation plays a central role in it. All research requires some measure of improvisation in responding to unexpected situations, part of the natural unfolding of life” (p. 175). While Bresler may have been speaking more to the observations and issues that emerge through the research, these statements can be applicable to the research process itself. That is to say that sometimes researchers have to deal with extenuating circumstances as a part of the research process.
3.5 Approaches to Data Analysis

Using within-case and cross-case analysis, I subsequently reviewed the data to consolidate findings. After reviewing the data several times, a process known as saturation (Creswell, 2014, p. 189), I assigned categories to the data to make it easier to process: 1) participants’ training and experience with improvisation, 2) perceived limitations of traditional choral settings, 3) rationales for using improvisation, 4) participants’ definitions and descriptions of improvisation, 5) personal approaches to implementing improvisation and 6) perceived benefits of improvisation. I noted that there were similarities and differences among the subjects’ perceptions and approaches and have accounted for those in my discussion by clarifying them.

3.6 Ensuring Reliability, Validity, and Trustworthiness

3.6.1 Validity

Drawing on a variety of sources of data, including video footage, audio footage, e-mails, transcripts, and field notes, I triangulated the data to justify and affirm emerging categories. I also sent each of the participants the transcripts of their interviews to ensure their thoughts and views were accurately represented.

3.6.2 Reliability

To the extent that it was possible, I tried to maintain a consistent approach with each participant. I conducted two interviews with each participant: one on-site, the other off-site, using similar questions (See Appendices B, C, D, and E). I also observed at least three choral rehearsals conducted by each participant within similar time frames. I observed each of the participants conduct rehearsals that occurred at the beginning of their respective choral seasons. Approximately six weeks later, I observed the next set of rehearsals for two of the participants. Due to scheduling restrictions, I observed one of the participants’ rehearsal nine months after initial rehearsal observations. As explained above, I felt it too valuable to include a high school context to drop this when the timing had to be adjusted.
3.7 Access, Ethics, Informed Consent

This study has been reviewed by the University of Toronto Review Ethics Board. The three participants signed an informed consent document, thereby agreeing to be interviewed and observed for this study. As the site for one of the participants was a public school located in a western province, I obtained permission from the presiding school division. The participants also gave me permission to record interviews conducted over the phone. Ethical considerations regarding anonymity were mitigated with the use of pseudonyms and masked references to geographical locales.

3.8 Participant Profiles

The phenomenon of improvisation in choral settings cannot be divorced from the practitioners themselves, or the context within which they incorporate improvisation. Accordingly, the following provides a description of the choral settings where I observed each of the participants working with their students. While the choristers themselves were not interviewed in this study, a description of the choirs including the participants’ primary ensemble goals, rehearsal procedures, physical settings, and demographics will help to illustrate ways in which these three educators utilized improvisation with their choirs.

3.8.1 Participant A - John

John was a choral and voice teacher at a mid-sized Southern state university that is largely populated by in-state residents. At the time this data was collected, he was starting his third year at this institution. He conducted two university ensembles, a women’s chorus comprising music majors and non-music majors at various stages of study, and an auditioned advanced level mixed-voice chorus comprising music majors as well as non-music majors at the sophomore, junior, and senior levels. In addition to choral ensembles, John oversaw the vocal department. This was his second university appointment after graduating with a Doctorate in Choral Conducting and Literature from a mid-western American University.
3.8.1.1 The Chorale

The *Chorale* was an advanced select ensemble with a history of national and international performances and appearances at state and national conferences. It was the top tier choral ensemble within the choral program offered at the Faculty of Music. This auditioned SATB choir comprised approximately 40 juniors and seniors who were music majors and non-music majors. Only the rare freshman was allowed into this ensemble: “I just don’t know the freshman yet and I want to make sure that I have people I can trust” (1st Interview)\(^1\). The Chorale was aided by an accompanist. Other personnel included a choir manager, a student president, a student vice-president, and an historian.

Chorale rehearsed Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for approximately sixty minutes each day. There was also an expectation that students rehearse outside of these rehearsal times and that they access rehearsal tracks of the repertoire they were studying. The repertoire for this ensemble during the time of my observations represented a traditional palette of choral music including selections from the Western European canon of music, an arrangement of an American folksong, an African-American spiritual, as well as piece recently published by an American composer.

Chorale rehearsed in two venues. One was in a lecture hall housed in the Faculty of Music building. This space seated approximately 150 students and was an open-concept design with two pianos, a high-ceiling, and bright lighting. The other rehearsal venue was a lecture hall located in the Sciences building across from the Faculty of Music building. This hall seated approximately 300 students with a small stage at the front, barely allowing for Chorale, which typically rehearsed in a circle, to fit on the stage along with the upright piano.

\(^1\) For a listing of specific interview dates for the three participants, please refer to Appendix F.
It was evident that John had high expectations for this ensemble. In the first rehearsal, he outlined several important performances for the year, including singing with a nationally renowned professional choir and performing at a state professional organization conference in the spring. “I’m really excited about that and looking forward to that leading to other bigger conferences down the road…” (Rehearsal observation). He told the students that he would like them to perform at ACDA. There was also mention of international competitions in the years to come. These wishes were in keeping with one of the primary goals of this choir that he discussed in our second interview: “To create music at the highest level possible” (1st Interview). While pursuing musical excellence by making “music at the highest level possible” was a priority, John stated that an overriding goal for this ensemble was “to move people and to move us as singers…everything has to come from a soulful place or a heart-filled place” (2nd Interview). John admitted that this has been a struggle with this ensemble, breaking through emotional barriers:

I don’t know what it is about the culture here, but I’ve really had a tough time breaking down the walls of these students to get out of their box. They really have a tough time expressing and not worrying about technical aspects. (2nd Interview)

Perhaps John’s approach to making music was helping to break down walls. John was seemingly well-liked by his students; the students were demonstrative of their feelings toward him. I witnessed several students greet him with a hug, and or make a conscious effort to say “Hi” to him at the beginning of the first rehearsal. At the end of one rehearsal, the students surprised John by singing Happy Birthday to him.

Even at the first rehearsal, there was evidence of a strong sense of community among the choristers, many of whom were returning students to this ensemble. Individual introductions were met with laughter, shouts, and clapping from the rest of the group. At the end of rehearsal, students lingered to talk to one another. John endorsed community building in this ensemble:

I’ve got to tell you what I’m so excited about. I feel like you have taken this on as your choir. I love that you have already met as groups in sectionals…The feeling I get from
you guys when I see you passing in the hallways is already so strong. I’m excited about what’s about to happen. Thank you for doing that.” (Rehearsal observation)

For those who were new to the ensemble, John encouraged students with less experience to get in touch with those who had been in the group for a while. One student advised students in the ensemble to text him or other members if new members had questions. John also reminded new students about a Facebook page dedicated to Chorale members.

The sense of community was also apparent in John’s remarks about this ensemble: “It’s not a dictatorship. It’s definitely a democracy” (1st Interview). He also underscored the value of a choir retreat that takes place at the beginning of the academic year: “They’re going to spend 30 some odd hours together. They’re going to get to know each other on a different level. And I think that also helps the bond. You need them to feel comfortable with each other.” (1st Interview).

3.8.1.2 John’s Rehearsal Style

John’s passion for music-making was evident throughout the rehearsals I observed. “Let’s go. I wanna sing,” he announced at the first rehearsal of the year as he paced the floor, patiently waiting for the students milling about the bottom of the lecture hall stage to collect their music. There was an intensity to his rapid-speech commands that was reminiscent of a high school basketball coach: “Balance that. Do you hear voices sticking out? Keep it going. Who’s sticking out? I want to hear one sound. Go. Keep it going. Take a breath if you need to” (1st Rehearsal).

John’s ebullient style was hard to miss as he addressed a number of issues in the choral rehearsal that typically arise in many choral rehearsals, including intonation, balance, pronunciation, vocal quality, tempo, and phrasing. He used his resonant, brilliant tenor voice to demonstrate musical and vocal concepts. As he paced around the circle, he urged singers to consider the text: “Why would Monteverdi start on a low note?” (2nd Rehearsal). He revealed to the choristers that the
choral writing emulates the rise of the sun. At a particularly dramatic moment in another piece, John stamped his foot and used a sweeping gesture with his arms to convey the apex of the musical phrase, almost willing the singers to feel the momentum of this particular phrase.

The intensity of these rehearsals was moderated by humour and affirmative statements. John also often reinforced his high expectations for the choir with high praise: “I am excited about this year like you wouldn’t believe” and “Oh man, that’s a great sound” (2nd Rehearsal).

3.8.2 Participant B – Beth

Beth was a choral professor at a public liberal arts and research university in a Southeastern state, where roughly ninety percent of the undergraduate student population were in-state residents. Beth had been teaching at this institution for eight years. She conducted a women’s chorus and an auditioned mixed-voices ensemble for voice majors. Beth also taught conducting at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Her degrees included a Bachelor of Music in Music Education as well as a Master of Music and a Doctorate of Musical Arts in conducting from an Eastern state university.

3.8.2.1 Chorale

The choral program at this institution comprised four ensembles, including two mixed voiced ensembles, a chamber choir comprising 20-25 students at pre-professional levels of vocal study, and Chorale, which Beth conducted. Chorale featured approximately 40 undergraduates and graduates studying music, many of whom were voice majors. This ensemble rehearsed three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for approximately 60 minutes per rehearsal. The repertoire for this ensemble encompassed standard SATB repertoire as well as chamber works and major works for orchestra. The rehearsal venue was a multipurpose room with high ceilings, tiered levels on one side of the room, and a wall that had two large mirrors, presumably for dance rehearsals. Of the rehearsals I observed, the choir rehearsed in a semi-circle formation with the sopranos seated in rows on the floor level to the left of the conductor’s podium, the
basses and tenors seated in tiered rows directly in front of the conductor, and the altos seated in rows to the right of the conductor’s podium. Beth also made use of the rest of this multipurpose rehearsal space when she utilized improvisation with her students.

Beth’s goals for the choristers were three-fold: “for them to experience themselves as independent musicians; to come to unified sound without having to do a lot of modifying their vocal technique,” and “for them to really connect with the music that we’re performing” (Beth, 2nd Interview). Beth elaborated on the last goal, saying that while she still had an overall vision for a piece that they were working on, she wanted to give choristers more ownership by prompting them to consider how they related to the text of a piece, or by “feeling a connection through talking about what the music means to them” (2nd Interview). Common to the goals Beth enumerated was a focus on student-centred learning that targeted intellectual, technical, and emotional aspects of choral/vocal artistry.

It was clear that students were friendly with each other. While waiting for rehearsal to start, the room was abuzz with chatter amongst pockets of choristers. The conversations grew louder and louder as more choristers arrived. They reached a fever pitch until Beth played a major triad on the piano and sang “Happy Friday.” It was time to start the rehearsal. During the moments of improvisation, students clapped for each other as a gesture of support and affirmation of each other’s creative explorations. When a student used light-hearted humour to describe impressions of working with improvisation, the rest of the choir echoed these sentiments with laughter, suggesting both a positive and accepting classroom environment.

3.8.2.2 Beth’s Rehearsal Style

Beth was poised on the podium. She moved effortlessly from piece to piece with confidence. Her instructions were clear and measured and often delivered with a warm smile. She addressed issues of balance, tuning, vocal production, and the text from the raised podium that sat in front of a large grand piano, and occasionally stepped off the podium to communicate with a particular
section. Beth was efficient, moving swiftly from diagnosing to prescribing to the subsequent implementation of her suggestions, often punctuating students’ efforts with thank-yous and occasional humorous observations: “Whoever is singing that [low] F is totally my hero.” (2nd Rehearsal). She clearly had a rapport with the students that was built on mutual respect. Her philosophical outlook on choirs modeled this type of reciprocity:

What I aim to create in my regular rehearsing... is an organic back and forth exchange of energy between myself and the ensemble... And I tell them this a lot: I am part of the organism that is the ensemble, not something that is separated from it. So, they need to provide as much energy as they are perceiving from me so that we can have a dialogue. (1st Interview)

3.8.3 Participant C – Sarah

Sarah was a choral music educator at a secondary high school in Western Canada where she had been teaching for eleven years. The student body comprised approximately 1200 students from grades nine to twelve. Roughly eighty percent of the students were first-generation Canadians. Sixty percent of the students reported English as an additional language. A total of 58 languages were represented by the student and staff population. Sarah’s teaching assignment during the year (2015-2016) included teaching three choirs: a concert choir, an auditioned chamber choir, and an auditioned vocal jazz ensemble. Sarah holds a diploma in Contemporary Music and both a Bachelor’s degree and Master’s degree in Music Education from a Canadian university.

3.8.3.1 Concert Choir

The concert choir was one of many music electives in which students may participate at this school. Other music courses included concert band, jazz improvisation, two jazz choirs, a chamber choir, a musical theatre course, piano keyboard skills, and a guitar class. The concert choir membership was reflective of the overall population of the school. Sarah noted that up to 20 languages other than English can be heard in any given choir class. Equally diverse was the
experience with which these students came to the program, some having never sung in a choir prior to working with Sarah.

The choir sections operated on a rotating schedule in which Sarah worked with each section on alternating days throughout the year. The repertoire encompassed a well-balanced mixture of Western European music as well as music from around the world and various genres of pop music. The choir typically performed twice per semester, including school functions and music festivals. While the choral program boasted an impressive stream of invitations to and earned gold standings at provincial and national music festivals, garnering performance awards was not the main mission of the music program at Sarah’s school: “The number one goal for me and my [teaching] partner…in the music program is to teach citizenship” (2nd Interview). With her students, Sarah aims

to create a sense of community…to make a safe space for students to get to explore who they are or express themselves…and to figure out how they might contribute effectively, healthily, productively to whatever communities they find themselves [in] when they leave high school. (2nd Interview)

She further stated the importance of fostering her students’ sense of belonging:

I feel like the community piece leads to better goals, to better choirs, although that’s not the primary goal, ‘cause most of our kids are not going on to do careers in music. But, they’re all going to go on to be human beings somewhere. So, I want them to be the best kind of human beings they can be in whatever it is they grow up to do. (2nd Interview)

There were a number of relationship-building initiatives that I observed in this relaxed educational setting. There were posters throughout the room emphasizing music-making (“Singing is Listening”) as well as a number of “year-in-review” photo collages of the choral
program. On another wall were envelopes for members of a chamber choir with whom she works. Students in this choir were invited to write celebratory notes of affirmation to each other.

The students and music staff reflected an open, supportive, and collaborative atmosphere. It was not uncommon for Sarah’s teaching partner to drop in during her class to ask a question about ordering equipment, music teaching resources, or other aspects of the music program and vice versa. It was a given that when either Sarah or her teaching partner went on a coffee run that they would purchase a coffee for each other. During one rehearsal I observed, a student who was not a member of the class walked in. She was one of the librarians who, in exchange for helping to organize the choral library, would have her choir trip to an out-of-province music festival subsidized. During another rehearsal, a former student came into the class, offering a plate of cookies to the students.

This empathic environment went beyond the walls of the classroom, both literally and figuratively. Henley’s *Invictus*, a poem about enduring life’s hardships, hung on two walls in the room. This poem was the theme around which Sarah selected her music for next year. In informal conversations, Sarah talked about offering students rides home after an evening rehearsal, as the area where the school is located is not safe to walk at night. There was also a barbeque for all of the music students at her teaching partner’s house as a celebration of the end of the year.

There were a number of rehearsal spaces that were available to the choir. Both sections of the concert choir rehearsed in a large room with tiered floors that also served as a rehearsal space for the band. Chairs were arranged in rows facing the front of the classroom. A teacher’s desk and computer station hid behind the baby grand piano that occupied most of the space on the floor. There were other electric keyboards lining one side of the room. There were two other small rooms which had keyboards that were located at the front of the room, allowing for breakout
sectional rehearsals and for additional piano students. One of these rooms also housed the choral library.

Sometimes the larger section of concert choir rehearsed in a room located two doors down the hallway. This multipurpose room was twice as large as the above-mentioned music room, with ceilings that were fifteen feet high. One wall was covered in large mirrors. There was a small stage with a set of stage lights at the back of this space. There was no piano in this room. The only other pieces of furniture were one or two chairs and a teacher’s desk. This room hosted the school’s thriving dance program and rehearsals for the school’s biennial musical theatre productions.

3.8.3.2 Sarah’s Rehearsal Style

I did not observe Sarah working with the concert choir in a traditional rehearsal setting. Rather, the rehearsals I observed were mainly of Sarah incorporating improvisation. Sarah dedicated a half period to improvisation with her students approximately every five classes. I did observe Sarah working with her jazz groups, however. Sarah diagnosed issues as they arose, often turning to the students for their observations with questions like “Was that in tune?” and “How was our tempo?” (Rehearsal observation). Sarah also utilized sectional rehearsals where students were sent to various parts of the room in groups to listen to rehearsal tracks that had been prepared for them.

Sarah projected an ease of delivery and familiarity with the students. “Hello, nerd” she said to one student entering the class (Rehearsal observation). In this context, “nerd” was a positive word denoting not only a genuine enthusiasm for choir, but that this student was an accepted and valued member of this choral community. Students sat in their assigned positions within the rows, and she began the class at the piano: “Good afternoon, choir,” she announced. “Good afternoon, Ms. Smith” the students replied (Rehearsal observation). She guided the students using vocal and physical warm-ups, frequently playing from the piano to provide a tonal
framework for the students while her students listened intently to what she had to say. She was in full command of the rehearsal space. The students were well-behaved, quiet, and always seemed to respond in kind to Sarah’s requests.

3.9 Summary

This chapter summarized the methodology I selected for this study, including rationales for the case-study research method, types of data collected, a timeline for the data collection, as well as profiles of the three participants involved in this study. The following chapter explores the results yielded from the data collected for this study.
Chapter 4 Results

4.1 Introduction

Three central questions guided this study of improvisation and its role in choral settings. They are: 1) Why should improvisation be used in choral settings? 2) How can improvisation be used in choral settings? and 3) What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings? In order to address these questions, I sought out three choral educators who routinely used improvisation with their choral students. I collected data about their use of improvisation through interviews with the participants and observations of their choral rehearsals. The following chapter outlines my findings.

4.2 Chapter Overview

After I analyzed the data, I subsequently coded these and organized my findings into categories: 1) participants’ training and experience with improvisation, 2) perceived limitations of traditional choral settings, 3) rationales for using improvisation, 4) participants’ definitions and descriptions of improvisation, 5) personal approaches to implementing improvisation, and 6) perceived benefits of improvisation.

4.3 Participants’ Training and Experience with Improvisation

4.3.1 John

John’s musical upbringing was replete with stories of harmonizing to songs with his family on road trips as a young boy. As seems typical, however, (Adderley, 2000; Bernhard & Stringham 2016; Kirkland, 1996), John’s formal music training was devoid of improvisation experiences: “I got my Master’s and sang in choirs all my life and not once was improvisation a part of any of that” (1st Interview). John recalled two experiences that piqued his curiosity about improvisation while studying to be a choral educator—a jam session at the piano with a college friend and a chance meeting with a music education professor whom he observed using improvisation with
her undergraduate students. This meeting prompted further exploration into improvisation in relation to play theory and education that later formed the basis of John’s doctoral work.

Prior to graduate studies, John taught choral music, both at the middle school and high school levels, for six years in a western state. This was when he began experimenting with improvisation with his choral students: “I started dabbling in improvisation, but, I certainly didn’t look at it as that at the time because I wasn’t studying it” (1st Interview). Assuming his middle school students could spontaneously harmonize an American patriotic hymn, he was shocked to realize that even though he himself had grown up harmonizing songs with his family, this skill was beyond these students’ grasp. John saw the ability to harmonize as fundamental to being a musician, noting that he has “not come across any culture where improvisation doesn’t play a role in some fashion” (1st Interview).

John was also troubled by the mundaneness of the warm-up routine in choral rehearsals. He explained,

I noted that the warm-up time, although valuable in any way that you do it, became mundane a lot of times. Being a part of choir, I realized, oh yeah, this is that little process that we do before we get to the singing, you know? And I took note of that and I didn’t want that. The whole choir period should be about singing and making music. And so that’s when I started incorporating, at a basic level, improvisation” (1st Interview). Then I realized that gosh, if I could just get their brains activated during the [warm-up] time also and get ‘em to create…to actively think about what they are doing, well I’m obviously accomplishing goods things there if that can happen. (2nd Interview)

John has written about improvisation in a national choral journal, and his teaching ideas have been featured in a chapter about improvisation in choral settings in a book about choral conducting.
4.3.2 Beth

For Beth, working with improvisation was a relatively new phenomenon. Like John, she reported few instances in her formal training as an instrumentalist and music educator that included studying improvisation. These included a jam session as a brass instrumentalist and minimal forays into Baroque ornamentation with a vocal coach. Beth cited a speech given by improviser and author of Free Play, Stephen Nachmanovitch, at a band directors’ conference in the early 2000s, as well as her own research into play theory, as catalysts for working with improvisation in choral settings. Again, like John, Beth’s initial forays with improvisation were serendipitous: “So, I had time in…an undergraduate conducting class one day. And I just kind of threw them in and I said, ‘Okay, the four of you, make something up’” (1st Interview). Beth continued her work in improvisation with her conducting students as a way to talk about “the give and take that you need on the podium…It was a total experiment” (1st Interview). Beth has been exploring improvisation with her choirs for approximately four years. She has written about these experiences in a national choral journal.

As a performing artist herself, Beth continues to develop her own improvisation skills through her membership in a local collective of musicians, artists, and dancers who specialize in collaboration, improvisation, and performing in non-traditional performance spaces.

It has been so important for me to put my money where my mouth is and to be in a group that improvises and to perform as an improviser because before, I was just sort of the orchestrator of all the improvisation, and I would participate with my students on that level, but I wasn’t performing on a professional level…and it has really been a powerful affirmation of what I am…hoping to impart on my students. My own performing as an improviser and what that has taught me about myself and the relationships that I’ve made through that have been really important. (1st Interview)

Just as her choral students were asked to take creative risks in improvisation strategies during Chorale rehearsals, so did Beth as a member of a local performance collective. Beth’s engagement with improvisation not only fueled her own artistic development as a musician, but served as a model to her choral students.
4.3.3 Sarah

Sarah recalled her initial experiences with improvisation as a high school student. At the last minute, she was selected to sing a jazz solo because the music teacher had heard her talk about listening to jazz. Other experiences included improvising with a small group of multigenerational female instrumentalists and learning formulaic approaches to improvisation in her Contemporary Music degree program. During her studies as a flute major in her undergraduate music education degree program, she used improvisation as a gateway to developing cadenzas for flute concertos, which would then become fixed compositions. This was the only experience Sarah had with improvisation during her music education studies. Sarah’s minimal exposure to improvisation at the tertiary level of her training mirrored that of both Beth and John.

Sarah first began using improvisation with her traditional choirs by accident. She found herself teaching a workshop of forty-five people and soon realized that circle singing was a way of accommodating large numbers. She subsequently began using this form of group improvisation with members of her concert choir.

4.4 Participants’ Perceived Limitations of Traditional Choral Settings

4.4.1 Notebound

All three participants either alluded to or discussed constraints of traditional choral settings in terms of the notated score. “So for my students, I see…them exercising their creativity in improvisation in a way that I don’t always see when they approach written music” (Beth, 1st Interview). When students improvise, John observed, “They’re not tied to the notes on the page” (2nd Interview). Sarah recalled her feelings the first time she improvised, as a mixture of “raging fear” and “an edge of excitement” at the prospect of “being able to depart from what was on the page” (1st Interview). With regard to Sarah’s students, she believed improvisation allows them to explore their singing without having “the imposition of trying to read notes” (1st Interview).
Learning notes during rehearsals was seen as a burdensome task at times (Apfelstadt, 2015; Ulrich, 1988). Both John and Sarah referred to “pounding the notes,” a pejorative term in this context to illustrate a necessary, but not always desired, part of the rehearsal process. Sarah enumerated a number of reasons for using improvisation in choral classes: “Sometimes we’re just playing. Or sometimes it’s just Friday and I don’t wanna slug away at notes, you know, like, sometimes it’s just for pure pleasure, you know?” (1st Interview). John recalled developing improvisation strategies based solely on the text of a piece that they were about to explore for the first time. He explained,

> So instead of doing it the other way where you pound out the notes and try to get everything learned and then maybe try to dissect, I wanna try to go the other way. Let’s find out. Let’s get to the heart of the matter first and then work out the technical things. (1st Interview).

### 4.4.2 The School of Technical Issues

Valorizing the mastery of technical aspects in the music-making process was problematic for John. John recalled the tone of his piano lessons when he was young. “‘You played the wrong note. You got to use finger number five. You have to cross over here,’” he admonished, mimicking the voice of his piano teacher. “Well, this isn’t music. I mean, I didn’t put words to it at the time, but looking back, like man, I wasn’t creating music. That wasn’t a creative exercise. That was a real technical lame thing that wasn’t fun” (1st Interview). Elsewhere he expressed his disdain for an approach to rehearsing choir that he referred to as “the school of technical issues” (2nd Interview). He felt his students have had trouble expressing and “not worrying about technical aspects” (2nd Interview).

> I really could care less if the “t” is exactly together…that’s not my ultimate goal. A lot of our colleagues will rehearse that goal for a long period in a rehearsal, and I just get bored with that. I don’t care. I think the “t” can be together, but let’s have it come from some place other than this technical counting of a one-ee-and-a-tee. (2nd Interview)
He was alluding to learning and rehearsing rhythms in choral settings called *count-singing*, an approach that renowned and revered choral conductor Robert Shaw used to engender rhythmic clarity.

For John, it seemed that this “someplace” goes beyond a clinical or passive approach to making music. He had similar opinions about re-creation: “Making music is not about the printed page…making music is a creative concept” (2nd Interview). He elaborated on how improvisation can help students tap into creativity with the written score:

> When one can simply listen to a melody and create a harmony part separate from that that’s not written, I think that uses the same part of the brain that I think we need with the printed music…I think, ultimately when you get to printed music and you’re creating harmonies and you’re creating blend, etc., you have to use a different part of the brain to really make that happen. And it’s a creative part. In other words, it’s more than you sing your part and I sing my part separately and somehow, it’s going to create something. I don’t think that’s true. I think we have to work with each other to successfully make that happen. (1st Interview)

### 4.4.3 Passive Engagement

There was also a sense that certain aspects of choral settings risk the danger of becoming routine or, by extension, that choristers take a passive role in this setting. John, for example, felt that sometimes the warm-up process can be tedious or “mundane” (2nd Interview), a sentiment echoed by Apfelstadt (1989), who notes that “the warmup period may become an automatic, perfunctory beginning to a rehearsal, relatively meaningless to the students, unless the teacher consciously involves them in the process” (p. 77). John believed that improvisation is an effective tool to activate choristers’ awareness. Several times John mentioned the term *actively think* (2nd Interview) when improvising. This sentiment was expressed in the various strategies John used with his students (See Appendix G). For example, instead of asking students to sing a descending major scale as part of a typical vocal warm-up routine, John points to several students and invited them to ornament these scale degrees while the rest of the group sang the
scale. When he repeated the exercise, he called on a section to ornament while the other sections sang the descending major scale. (See Appendix G, *Descending Scale*). It seemed that by varying which students he asked, singers became more alert to the possibility that they may have to ornament scale degrees in real-time, thereby countering the predictability of the warm-up strategy.

Beth, too, liked to combat “going through the motions of performing” (1st Interview) by using improvisation to activate students’ awareness of the composer’s intentions:

> In terms of musical things like dynamics and silence, for them to experience those things organically as they create them, can give them a new approach to how it should feel when they create a crescendo as an ensemble. Because it does feel different when you are crescendo-ing with a group of people. You don’t know it’s going to happen until it’s actually happening and it’s this organic thing that is happening: that is what a composer wants. At least that’s what I think the composer wants is this organic sense of everybody’s moving in the same direction. And the same thing with the other way, with *decrescendos*, the sort of rise and fall that is so natural and what composers want us to express. They can experience them as they create them. (1st Interview)

It seemed that Beth believed that when students improvise, they experience dynamics as active stakeholders in the music-making process. The students respond to the real-time unfolding of musical events that are informed by the singers around them and the environment in which they are creating, a phenomenon Sawyer (2006) refers to as “collaboration” (p. 148) in his discussion of group creativity. The same does not necessarily hold true when choristers work with the notated score, however. Students can take a more passive role in the music-making process. They may respond, for example, with an increase in volume because the conductor has asked them to crescendo or because there is a crescendo marking in the score. In this scenario, students’ responses may be largely guided by extrinsic factors i.e., the conductor asked for the crescendo, the composer asked for the crescendo.
Experiences with improvisation, however, can potentially foster more personalized responses to the notated score. While the chorister understands intellectually the signal either through notational symbols or the conductor’s gesture for a crescendo, through experimenting with improvisation, this dynamic marking has become embodied through their own experiences with dynamics, so that the choristers’ responses to these visual cues are representative of their personal experiences with and understandings of what a crescendo is. The crescendo becomes an intrinsic and perhaps “organic” (Beth, 1st Interview) response to the composer’s intent. In this way, improvisation can help to counter scenarios in choral settings in which “the students act as mere automatons responding with little independent thought” (Apfelstadt, 1989, p. 74).

4.4.4 Giving Up the Reins

The conductor in a traditional choral setting is typically viewed as an authority figure (Apfelstadt, 1989; Bartel, 2004b). That is, typically, the conductor in these settings is responsible for most of the musical decisions for the ensemble. The three participants alluded to the hierarchical stature of the conductor in choral settings in their own way. John eschewed the connotations of absolute authority that can be associated with being a conductor: “I’m working toward the performance of getting students to think more as opposed to follow the dictator. I want them to be leaders” (2nd Interview). Beth saw her role as a conductor as part of the organism (1st Interview) which destabilized the hierarchical nature of the conductor in this situation. When working with improvisation, Beth proposed, conductors must be willing to give up “creative reign” (1st Interview). In her capacity as the choral director, Sarah, also illustrated the extent to which control of the classroom setting lies in the hands of the director. I prompted Sarah about an exchange she had with a student during an exploration with improvisation. The student was not on task, laughing and distracting others around him. I commented that the type of behaviour the student demonstrated would not be tolerated as much in traditional rehearsals. Sarah replied,

The thing about a traditional choral rehearsal is that there is no question where the status is: I have all of the status. They are all beneath me. And so it’s a very easy kind of maintenance situation, right? (2nd Interview).
4.4.5 The Shining Trophy

The three participants also referenced the role of performance in their choral programs. Through working with improvisation, Beth has realized that “the performance is just a part of the process, rather than…the shining trophy at the end of the cycle” (1st Interview). John alluded to time constraints when he talked of a “looming” performance (2nd Interview). Sarah discussed how she would try to incorporate other types of music-making activities in the choral classroom “if we didn’t have to worry about festival” (2nd Interview). John’s and Sarah’s comments in particular suggest that performances continue to be a priority in these settings.

4.5 Rationales for Implementing Improvisation

4.5.1 John

John used improvisation with his choral students on an ongoing basis throughout the year. His reasons for using improvisation were two-fold. He used improvisation as a way to actively engage his students during rehearsal, as described above. He also used improvisation as a way to foster cohesion within the ensemble. He felt that improvisation was one way that students grow and learn with each other, which, in turn, strengthened the whole ensemble:

As I see it, choir is a team sport. Everybody has to play well with each other. And it’s not an individual thing. We do not all just sing our notes and miraculously have a sound. That’s not how it works. We have different types of voices. We have different types of personalities…people have to be able to work together and feel comfortable. There can’t be, “Well, here’s my good singers and they’re going to lead everybody else.” That’s just not going to do it. I mean, you’ll have a choir, but it’s not going to be any choir that I want to conduct. I want everybody to work together and I want my strongest singer to help my weakest singer and my weakest singer to help my strongest singer. And I want them to be able produce something together. I think improvisation helps that. (1st Interview).
Implicit in John’s response is his belief that improvisation can play a role in developing a synergetic approach to choral cohesion that invites students to work with each other to strengthen both individual and corporate abilities.

4.5.2 Beth

Beth reported using improvisation at least once a week on average with her choristers. As well, prior to working with her, few students had had little, if any, experience with improvisation. According to Beth, for her students “to feel valued as a creative individual with a group setting is really important” (1st Interview). Using improvisation with her students was a way to realize this goal: “Once I saw a little bit of what just, even just people as inherent creators could do if given the right kind of platform from which to do it…it was a no-brainer” (1st Interview). Elsewhere, Beth reported that the feedback the students give after working with improvisation was helpful in drawing students’ attention to the factors involved in making music: “I want them to be aware and not just to act” (2nd Interview). She felt that having such an awareness “makes them better musicians and performers” (1st Interview).

4.5.3 Sarah

Sarah had been using improvisation with her choristers for several years. She typically reserved improvisation strategies for one out of every five periods, sometimes calling them “Freestyle Fridays,” where she dedicated half of that period to improvisation strategies. Most of her students, Sarah explained, have had much experience with improvisation prior to working with her.

Sarah’s reasons for enlisting improvisation were manifold. There were pieces in the repertoire she has selected for the choir that featured improvisation, for example. Accordingly, Sarah was committed to teaching the skills needed to improvise in these contexts. Sarah often used improvisation to pre-teach concepts to her students, such as a particular scale or rhythmic motif.
Through these improvisation strategies, students also became familiar with her conducting gestures.

Sarah cited other reasons for using improvisation with her choral students. Improvisation allowed students with limited choral experience to “explore some of the boundaries of their own vocal ability and potential” (1st Interview). This rationale accords well with the results of Hirschorn’s (2011) study of middle school choral students’ engagement with vocal improvisation, as exemplified by the following observation of his participants: “Other students described improvisation as a means to vocal development, pointing to opportunities for voice range expansion” (p. 141). On a broader level, Sarah discussed the value of improvisation. She is “very much about the idea of participatory singing” (1st Interview). “I feel like improvisation is a way of expanding that circle of welcome for more people to come into the world of making vocal sound and for it to feel safe and like a pleasant and pleasurable activity” (1st Interview).

4.6 Perceptions of Improvisation

4.6.1 Improvisation in Choral Settings

When participants were asked to what degree they thought improvisation was valued in traditional choral settings, the responses were fairly consistent. Sarah believed that although improvisation is “valued” and “admired,” she doesn’t think that “a lot of choir teachers have a pedagogical basis or framework for which to introduce it into their own classrooms” (1st Interview). She attributed this to a lack of exposure in teacher education. Beth admitted that making a general statement about the role of improvisation in traditional choral settings was difficult: “It’s hard for me to answer…I’m not aware of a lot of improvisation going on…So, I don’t know how much it’s valued because I don’t know how many directors know that it is even possible” (1st Interview). John did not believe that improvisation was valued in the choral setting, in part, because of a lack of time:

I know very few conductors that use improvisation in any way in their classroom, even though it is a National Standard…I think it kind of gets ignored. And even when I bring it
up, ‘cause I’ve presented once or twice…and usually it’s met with a chuckle, “O yeah, right”…And I get it, because the rehearsal is so packed….

(1st Interview)

Sarah noted that even when choral teachers work on jazz repertoire, they “still manage to avoid doing any improvisation” (2nd Interview). The participants’ views regarding the degree to which improvisation was embraced in choral settings affirmed the findings of several researchers who investigated barriers to implementing improvisation. That is, implementing improvisation is impeded by a lack of formal training with improvisation (Hickey et al., 2016; Lehman, 2008) and a lack of time (Byo, 1999; Koutsoupidou, 2005; Schopp, 2006). That improvisation is largely being ignored, anecdotally speaking, was evidenced in another way: All participants confirmed that their choral students had had little to no experience with improvisation in traditional choral settings prior to working with them.

4.6.2 Defining Improvisation

The participants offered similar definitions of improvisation. When I asked Beth for her definition she replied, “Oh geez, I don’t even know… I think of improvisation as spontaneous creation” (2nd Interview), which corresponds to Lewis’ (1996) description of improvisation as “real-time music making” (p. 92). John defined improvisation as “basically…the ability to create some sort of musical line in the moment…” (2nd Interview). He also used terms like strict and loose to qualify this definition, corresponding to Campbell’s (2009) use of the terms tighties and loosies to describe the types of parameters used to distinguish different types of improvisation (p. 125). Sarah’s definition encompassed a broad understanding of improvisation: “Improvisation is a musical activity without a predetermined outcome” (2nd Interview). Sarah’s definition underscored both Pressing’s (1984) and Nettl’s (2013) comments about the wide breadth of parameters contained under the term improvisation. In any event, spontaneity, whether referenced directly or indirectly as in Sarah’s case, was a common feature of all of the participants’ definition of improvisation. Additionally, Beth referenced the collaborative nature of improvisation, recognizing that improvisation can occur in solo and group settings (2nd Interview).
4.7 Implementing Improvisation Part I: Strategies

The implementation of improvisation in choral settings comprised three main components. These include the strategies themselves, the ways in which the participants facilitate these strategies, and the environment under which improvisation takes place. The following section focuses on improvisational strategies.

4.7.1 Patricia Shehan Campbell’s Pedagogical Framework

As discussed in Chapter 2, Patricia Shehan Campbell (2009) describes approaches to improvisation in educational settings. When students are “improvising to learn music” (p.120), improvisation is used to explore musical aspects of a piece: scale, rhythm. This could be expanded to include vocal quality and the conductor’s gestures. “Learning to improvise music” (p.120) addresses the pedagogical considerations when teaching genres of music for which music is an inherent feature. “Improvising music to learn” (p. 120) is a broader lens that views improvisation as a medium through which students can learn about themselves and the world around them. I discussed Campbell’s framework with each of the participants and asked them to categorize their approach according to this model.

4.7.1.1 Improvising to Learn Music

Of the first lens, “improvising to learn music,” both Sarah and John used improvisation as a way to pre-teach concepts. Sarah asked students to improvise using the F minor harmonic scale and 10/8 metre, in anticipation of their exploration of the piece Lammaa Badaa Yatathannaa. John used a descending D major scale to have students demonstrate music in the style of various composers. He also liked using a strategy where students sing a five-note descending pattern, the order of which students can choose, so that students can become aware of his conducting gestures. For Beth, targeting musicianship was not the motivating reason for using improvisation. “I believe it does improve their musicianship skills, but that’s not my reason for using improvisation. My primary reason is for them to learn about themselves” (2nd Interview).
4.7.1.2 Learning to Improvise Music

Regarding the second lens, “learning to improvise music,” only Sarah reported that she used improvisation for this purpose. For example, she invited students to play with the F minor harmonic scale, the key of the piece *Lamamaa Badaa Yatathanna*, in anticipation of interspersing sections of improvisation throughout the piece as suggested by the arranger. Sarah also explained how she played with the idea “of just taking fragments of …other sections’ lines and… putting it different places in the bar to just create some improvised lines and stuff” (2nd Interview) as part of the choristers’ preparation of a gospel piece by Brian Tate called *Lift Up Your Voice*. While John did not specifically identify the second lens in his use of improvisation, he did engage students in a “jam session” with the piece *The Storm is Passing Over*, a gospel anthem in which improvising during this piece would be stylistically appropriate.

4.7.1.3 Improvising Music to Learn

All three reported that they used improvisation as a tool for students to discover themselves. John saw improvisation as a way to break down existing personal barriers among choristers to foster a stronger communal connection to music-making.

> I think improvisation helps strengthen the weakest singer. I think it strengthens everybody. It takes time for that person to feel comfortable expressing themselves in a creative way. But once you’re able to get them to do that in a safe, playful environment, then you have them where you want ‘em. You need the weakest person to feel willing to try things and feel willing to put themselves out on a limb and I think improvisation helps do that. (1st Interview)

In turn, this choral synergy allows the choir to have a deeper connection to the music that goes beyond the technical features of a piece:

> Now, doing technical things and working on technical things, now that’s easy to do ‘cause you don’t have to be close to the person next to you to understand counting and all of this kind of stuff. But what I’m asking them to do is to go beyond that, and to
experience something that is within us, within our soul, within our heart, and you can’t do that with a stranger very well. (2nd Interview)

Beth used “improvising music to learn” as a catalyst for students’ self-discovery. “I guess that I don’t have anything specific that I want them to learn about themselves, but just, they do” (1st Interview). She continued,

Just as an example, those two students that came to talk to me after. And those students have been with me since almost the beginning of what I’ve been doing with improvisation. So, for them to share what they learned about themselves, what they experienced themselves and what they observed about others. It was really, really interesting. (1st Interview)

On another occasion, I observed Beth asking students to share their observations about their recent improvisations. One chorister noted that most of the groups relied on tonality to ground their works. Another student realized the importance of eye contact within the group of singers. One student talked about how awkward she felt in the silence. Beth elaborated,

Maybe that’s not something that she had experienced or was aware of before. Maybe she had experienced it, but did something to cover the scariness and wasn’t aware of that…I think all of those things make them better musicians and performers. (1st Interview).

Sarah used this third lens, “improvising music to learn,” to give students voice, to empower them so they feel that they can make a contribution to the choir, despite their lack of experience or preconceived notions of talent and singing:

There is something that happens to them [students] when they leave high school where they think that singing is for an elite few, for a special anointed bunch, and most feel that they are not in that group and I feel like improvisation is a way of opening up who vocal music is available to. (2nd Interview)
4.7.2 Implementing Strategies – General Observations

Even though the strategies the participants used were different from each other, the participants shared similar approaches to implementing strategies with respect to prioritizing improvisation in rehearsals, sources of strategies, selection of strategies, group formations, and feedback.

4.7.2.1 Prioritizing Improvisation

It is interesting that John sometimes referred to his improvisational strategies as a “schtick” and as part of his “bag of tricks” (2nd Interview). This may leave one with the impression that improvisation is a novelty, a Monday morning activity gleaned from a Friday afternoon in-service. On the contrary, all of the participants reported using improvisation throughout the year at least once every rehearsal cycle. The time allotment for these strategies varied from participant to participant. When observing John’s initial rehearsals, he dedicated approximately 10 minutes out of the 60 minute rehearsals. John also conveyed that he tended to use longer strategies at the beginning of the year. Beth spent on average 30 minutes on improvisation with her students in the rehearsals I observed. Sarah spent on average 30 minutes on improvisation with her students during the “Freestyle Fridays” sessions. While there were some examples of integrating improvisational strategies with the choral repertoire studied, improvisation in all of these settings was compartmentalized. For the most part, John and Beth tended to utilize improvisation at the beginning of the rehearsals and then moved on to literature. Sarah devoted a half class to improvisation approximately one out of every five classes.

The degree to which the participants utilized improvisation in their rehearsals suggests that while improvisation is valued, it was not the dominant mode of music-making in these choral ensembles, and that improvisation was not prioritized in the same way as, for example, intonation. It would not be uncommon for choral directors to address intonation throughout a rehearsal, whereas in the contexts I observed, improvisation was not as integrative an activity as priorities such as balance, intonation, vowel shapes, and correct notes and rhythms. It seemed that the participants used improvisation to enhance these areas of choral artistry. Correlating
strategies with literature did not seem to be priority for the participants, with a few exceptions, however, to this observation. John reported:

> If I do an exercise that directly correlates to something in the literature, I may try to get feedback on the exercise so that I can say, afterwards, “Look, everything you just said now, is—happens in this piece that we’re singing.” (2nd Interview)

Similarly, Beth used the feedback her students gave her regarding improvisation to underscore their work with both notated scores and developing performance skills. She enumerated some of the questions she used when working with improvisation: “What things did you really love about what you just did? How, how did you feel in this moment? Could there have been more of this? What would that have done?” (2nd Interview). She continued,

> And I think the same thing can be applied to a regular rehearsal of written music, too…And I ask for feedback often. You know, “How can this be more effective?” So they say, “Oh, there’s a crescendo there.” And I say, “Yes, and you see me giving you one. (2nd Interview)

Elsewhere, Beth reported using the students’ feedback about their impressions of improvisation to other situations. “How does this relate or how can this relate other situations when you’re performing?” (2nd Interview).

4.7.2.2 Sources of Strategies

The sources of strategies the participants used with their choristers were varied. Sarah drew from several jazz methods books, such as Shelly Berg’s (1998) *The Goal Note Method* and Judy Niemack’s (2004, 2012) *Hear It and Sing It! Exploring Modal Jazz* and *Hear It and Sing It! Exploring the Blues*, as well as materials from Bobby McFerrin. These resources are no doubt reflective of her expertise in vocal jazz. John reported using material from a book of children’s songs to sometimes jumpstart an improvisation session. Beth drew from Nachmanovitch’s (2005) speech *On Teaching Improvisation*. Two participants also referenced Jeffrey Agrell’s
(2008) *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians*. In this regard, the participants’ use of the above-mentioned resources reflected the literature on strategies for improvisation in choral settings which includes both jazz and non-jazz idioms as sources for improvisation (Bell, 2004; Riveire, 2006; Williamson, 2009).

I did not get the sense, however, that the participants relied heavily on activity books; rather, they had a set repertoire of go-to strategies that they modified or adapted depending on the situation at hand. Sarah really had to like the strategy herself in order to sell it to her students. Furthermore, Sarah reported, “I don’t…have an improv curriculum…it’s also kind of improvised, you know, like how they reacted to the last thing …” (1st Interview). Similarly, Beth confessed, “I’m constantly experimenting” (2nd Interview):

…you know, honestly, I just play…I have some sort of structures in mind, but I just kind of just ride the energy of the group and if something comes to mind like this might be really good right now, then I just go for it. (1st Interview)

This last comment reveals a sense of play and spontaneity when implementing improvisational strategies. Participants commented on the improvisatory nature of using improvisation: “So, maybe I’ll do it just to see how it works,” and “We’ll see what happens” (John, personal conversations) were phrases John said to me as he toyed with a strategy he was considering using with one of his choirs thirty minutes before a rehearsal. Other phrases like, “I am improvising as I go,” “I adapt on the fly,” and “But you know, I adapt to whatever the situation is” (John, 1st and 2nd interviews, Sarah, 2nd interview) suggest an improvisatory approach to improvisation. These remarks, as well as Beth’s remarks above, exemplify Schön’s concept of “reflection-in-action” as advocated by Snow and Apfelstadt (2002, p. 202).

This is not to suggest that these conductors took a whimsical approach to planning and executing rehearsals in general. Semestered and weekly rehearsal schedules, performances, as well as rehearsal tracks provided evidence of advanced planning and organization. Similarly, I did not
observation instances where time was squandered due to a lack of organization in any of the rehearsals observed.

4.7.2.3 Selecting Strategies

The three participants offered several rationales for the selection of implementation strategies they used with their students. John believed that the danger of repeating certain strategies was that they could lose their emotional impact. He also varied the strategies, he explained, “because if I do an improvisation schtick every rehearsal, well then that would be become mundane” (2nd interview). John’s desire to present a varied diet of improvisational strategies was reminiscent of Kenny and Gellrich’s (2002) description of improvisers as risk-takers who intentionally avoided repeating ideas in favour of new ones. John’s tendency to vary strategies may be one way in which John engaged students in active thinking. Students could not predict with certainty what types of improvisational strategies to expect, forcing them to adapt to the parameters John gave them, depending on the strategy. Sarah used a variety of strategies in order to appeal to a wider range of choristers. Beth’s choice of strategies was varied because it was based on what she felt needed to be addressed at any given moment in the rehearsal. She drew a parallel between her rehearsal style and incorporating improvisation:

So the exercises some days are just, “Okay we’re going to do this, you know, one ten-minute exercise and move into music.” And then other days that thins out, and then I’m often creating exercises in the moment…sometimes I’ll think about it beforehand as I’m sort of dreaming up, “Okay what can I do with this?” And then other times it will just come to me while we’re working together. Which is, you know, it’s like a silly and mysterious way to put it but I can’t explain it in any other way. Except that it’s just like…when I rehearse regular music, and I’m in the moment of that and something’s not working and I’m evaluating what’s not working. And I’m also evaluating whether or not I have time to try something else. And then that something else may just come to me. Like, we’re going to do it this way. And then we see what happens. So, it’s a very similar feeling for me as a conductor. (2nd Interview)
4.7.2.4 Formations

The participants explored several formations when implementing improvisation. Common to all, however, was the circle formation. Beth outlined her reasons for using circles. When she was first working with improvisation, she asked volunteers to improvise with her while the rest of the choristers seated in rows watched. “So, in a sense, it made it like a performance” (2nd Interview). Creating such a performance atmosphere presumably distanced the rest of the choristers from those who were improvising. Upon reflection Beth thought, “Okay, so, next time, big circles—always big circles.” Beth liked this particular formation because a circle invites a supportive environment (2nd Interview).

In addition to circles, the participants used smaller group formations; i.e., groups of four or two. Sarah also used individual groupings, giving students individual space to spread out around the room in order to improvise. With some of the strategies, John made a point of calling on different individuals or groups of people so that everyone in the ensemble had opportunities to improvise.

4.7.2.5 Feedback

The participants often asked for students’ feedback immediately after implementing an improvisation strategy. The amount of time the participants devoted to feedback was tempered with availability of remaining class time and performance deadlines. Beth allotted the most time for student feedback, often ten minutes or so. The questions the participants posed were fairly broad: “Before we move on to the repertoire are there any comments or observations on improvising in sections this way? Things that were different?” (Beth, Rehearsal observations). “What did you notice? What did you like? Did you like it—good, bad, or indifferent?” (John, Rehearsal observations). Sarah often linked the feedback to underscore students’ understanding of improvisation. After students had tried the *Two Syllable Nonsense Conversations* improvisation strategy (See Appendix I) she asked, “How is this like improvisation?” She also asked students about a conducting exercise that involved improvisation: “What was challenging about doing that with your own little choirs?” “Can anyone tell me about some things that they
noticed about their own tries or things that happened in the group?” What else did you notice about improv?” (Rehearsal observations). As well, Sarah’s questions served as opportunities for students to reflect on the positive outcomes of having tried improvisation. “Was it fun?” “Did you do better than you thought you would?” (Rehearsal observations).

Sarah also used students’ feedback to underscore the feasibility of improvisation by linking students’ observations to real life situations. When a student noted the importance of listening to other members of her group during an improvisation, Sarah affirmed,

Yeah, you had to be really listening to hear what was happening or else you didn’t really catch the end of what was happening for you to incorporate that into your own nonsense conversation…Does that happen in real life? Like, you’re talking to someone and they’re answering you like, “You did not hear what I just said.” (Rehearsal observation).

Another student noticed that certain rhythmic motives kept reoccurring while they were improvising in the group. Sarah said, 

Did you have anything you kept coming back to? [The students say, “Yeah”]. That’s totally normal and it’s just like in regular conversation, whenever something makes me kind of angry I used to [say], “Seriously!? Seriously!?!...We have our little go-to things that we do over and over again, [The students say, “Yeah”] and it’s good, but sometimes when we’re in a circle, sometimes someone else’s rhythmic cell will become ours. We kind of get our own [ideas] and then we can borrow someone else’s too. So, it’s like having access to two closets, you get double the wardrobe. (Rehearsal observation)

4.7.3 Participants’ Strategies

There were a number of strategies that the participants either described to me or that I observed the participants utilize with their students. Several of these strategies involved tone clusters, embellishing a melody, the use of ostinato and familiar harmonic structures, and free
improvisation, supporting the literature on improvisational strategies that are typically advocated in music education settings (Agrell, 2008, Gagne, 2014; Parker, 1976, Pressing, 1998a, Riveire, 2006). For a detailed description of participants’ strategies, please refer to Appendices G, H, and I.

4.7.4 Balancing Priorities

One challenge common to all participants was trying to balance time for improvisation while meeting other goals during rehearsals. In one rehearsal I observed, John told me that he would be working on a little bit of improvisation, “…but I’ve got to get to my literature” (Rehearsal observation).

For Sarah, time, in a general sense was at issue when considering improvisation:

I think the biggest challenge is, you know, just the pressure to get everything, to fit everything in. Like to do theory, and to do technique, and to get all of the festival tunes learned and do improvisation…the biggest issue is just fitting it all in. (1st Interview)

In particular, Sarah wondered whether performance preparations suffered because of the time she allotted for improvisation:

I think the things that I worry about— you know, we have festival coming up in mid-November, and…there’s always the worry that you’re spending too much time on something that’s not going to get you ready for festival, although intellectually you understand that it is having other benefits that will be visible in our festival literature. But, you know, should I have spent today pounding more notes…? (1st Interview)

Beth, too, endeavoured to design a rehearsal schedule that “combines both the need for traditional repertoire learning and allowing my students to create, and giving that creation time, and giving them time to respond verbally, if they’re so inclined” (Beth, 1st Interview). Beth
admitted that sometimes she lets a round of improvisation “go much longer, because, things just come up” (Beth, 2nd Interview). On the other hand, she doesn’t always ask for feedback partly due to time constraints (Beth, 2nd Interview). Given the performance demands for this ensemble, I probed Beth further about her use of improvisation within the context of a university setting, where performances are valorized. I wondered whether or not her use of improvisation met with faculty approval. “So far, in this university and in this setting, I’ve had full support, because my performances haven’t suffered. They’re actually, I think, better” (1st Interview).

I also asked participants how their work with improvisation would change if they had fewer performance demands. John reflects,

I think if, if we didn’t have the pressures of, oh, we have to do this Monteverdi next week… I might take a little more time to have more play time, ‘cause, you know, as I’ve written, improvisation is an aspect of play and play is an educational concept that has been written about a lot—that’s how kids learn…and perhaps if I didn’t have that concert looming, I would just spend a little more time playing. (2nd Interview)

Sarah, too, talked about the pressures of performing:

Well, I think if I didn’t have to worry about going to festival…and singing something that someone else wrote, we might do improvisation every week like, you know, as much as 20% of our class time instead of getting it every second week…what would that be—40% of our class time instead of 20% of our class time…We might perform more improvised music on concerts…We have in the past. Like, when we’ve had a concert with an intermission, we got the audience back by encircling them and starting a circle song, but we might do that as a circle performance piece as opposed to a kind of a novelty thing…We might link our improvisation to composition and start writing some of our own material and arrangements, if we had more time. I think that would be very cool. (2nd Interview)
Beth mused,

This is going to kind of sound funny coming out of my mouth, given that you just said, “fewer performances,” but I would probably create more opportunities to perform improvisation during the regular rehearsal time…So, rather than an outside performance …that we are getting ready for …structure some experiences. I guess I should call them experiences…rather than thinking of it as a traditional performance where, you know, there’s an audience who sits down and you perform for them…Something more like we go and improvise in a public space and see what that’s like. I think I would just do a lot more experimenting and exploring. (2nd Interview)

The participants’ comments hearken back to Pignato’s (2010) observations about music education in the 20th century, in which “product-conducive” (p. 1) modes of music-making were favoured over “process-conducive” (p. 1) modes of music-making. It seemed that the participants were in favour of broadening the scope of activities in their choral rehearsals to embrace more process-oriented activities through improvisation, if given more time or if working with fewer performance demands.

4.7.5 Improvisation in Performance

The participants reported using improvisation as a performance vehicle. John has used an improvisation based on the text Alleluia (See Appendix G) as a concert opener. He also recounted a performance experience when students didn’t know ahead of time who would be soloing in an improvised section of a piece, adding that he sang an improvised solo as well. Sarah talked about using circle singing to start up the second half of a choir performance. Beth has experimented with improvisation as performance more extensively. One semester she and her students in a small chamber choir explored the music of a noted Renaissance composer, choosing to improvise in the style or choosing pieces written by the composer as inspiration for improvising. She has also experimented with a noted American composer’s set of songs, weaving notated scores with improvisatory experiences during a performance.
4.7.6 Evaluation

While some educators have provided models, i.e., rubrics for evaluating vocal improvisation in both jazz and non-jazz contexts (Azzara 2008; Madura, 1999; Watson, 2010), none of the participants in this study formally evaluated improvisation. The participants used several forms of evaluation that music educators endorse to develop critical thinking skills, including written feedback in the forms of journals, class evaluations, and verbal feedback to understand how students responded to improvisation (Apfelstadt, 1989; Beckmann-Collier, 1996; Keenan-Takagi, 2000; Shively, 2004; Snow & Apfelstadt, 2002).

All the study’s participants used feedback as an evaluation of learning. Sarah reported using her own observations and students’ feedback on a particular strategy to inform how she might tailor other improvisation strategies in the future. As well, sometimes she used improvisation as a way to give students opportunities to demonstrate vocal production. This may have been an appealing alternative for some of her students who may have felt uncomfortable singing a notated piece in a foreign language with, for example, difficult rhythms (1st Interview). John employed an improvisation strategy that asked students to sing in the style of a composer. He said this was one way to determine students’ knowledge of stylistic features of a composer and the style of a given piece. In this instance, improvisation was used to evaluate students’ learning. During one of Beth’s feedback sessions, the students rendered their observations about the challenges they encountered in creating music together. For example, after students had been exploring free improvisation in small groups, one student remarked that the students tended to fall back into “traditional harmonic patterns” (Rehearsal observation). The student not only demonstrated her awareness of standard harmonic progressions, but perhaps her predilection or her group’s predilection for tonal stability. This reflection highlights how improvisation contributed to students’ self-knowledge and awareness, while at the same, gave Beth insights into their understanding of the improvisation experiences.
4.8 Implementing Improvisation Part II: Facilitating Improvisation

The ways in which the participants facilitated improvisation with their students also yielded insights into how improvisation may be implemented in choral settings. Contrary to the traditional role of the conductor, who is largely seen as the authority and gatekeeper of knowledge, the choral educator wishing to engage in improvisation with students is a facilitator, whose chief roles are to create and curate a safe space in which students can utilize self-agency to create music.

4.8.1 Understanding Fear

4.8.1.1 Students’ Sources of Fear

Before considering strategies to use with students, it is important to consider the environment under which improvisation occurs. It is not surprising that fear is a topic that came up in my discussions with the participants. Fear is a recurring theme in the research concerning teaching education (Bernhard, 2013; Ward-Steinman, 2007), and students’ fear is often discussed in articles about improvisation in music education settings (Azzara, 1999; Campbell, 2009; Whitcomb, 2013). The participants enumerated various sources of fear that students experienced.

John talked about students’ vulnerability: “Well, initially, it’s fear—the fear of students…you’re setting up something and you say, ‘Okay, now you go. You step off the ledge and try something’” (1st Interview). Beth attributed some of the fear to the traditional emphasis on recreation in choral settings: “we’re told, especially in a conservatory-like setting, we are taught so often to recreate, recreate, recreate, that, you know, someone saying, “sing anything” can be really scary” (1st Interview). Beth also felt that lack of experience with improvisation may contribute to feelings of inadequacy:

It’s not in our musical culture, so for trained musicians we aren’t given opportunities to improvise, and we think that it’s this secret thing that only jazz musicians do or only brilliant musicians can sit down at the piano and make something up. (2nd Interview)
It would seem that students were fearful of not measuring up to others. In both Sarah and Beth’s rehearsals, choristers said after hearing a chorister improvise, “How do I top that?” Similarly, John, as if to pre-empt a student’s worry about following a chorister who improvised an extensive solo, told the next student, “Don’t think that you have to do that” (Rehearsal observation). Sarah believed that her students, “feel like improvisation has to be a long, fully thought-out, planned with a…high point” (Follow-up interview). Beth believes that students’ fear stems from doubts about creating: “we have some self-judgement about our ability to create” (2nd Interview). She suspected that “some of the fear is sort of wrapped in revealing themself [sic] to not have a beautiful sound or not believing they have a beautiful sound and not wanting anyone else to hear it” (2nd Interview). Not measuring up can have serious repercussions, Sarah believed. She felt that some of her students were worried that their attempts may “result in shunning from the community” (1st Interview).

### 4.8.1.2 Typical Responses to Improvisation

Three participants reported shyness and laughter as typical responses to improvisation, and that these reactions likely masked fear and nervousness. John described his experiences with his high school choristers: “you have…guys thinking, I’m being stereotypical here, but…This isn’t cool. I’ve gotta be cool. And girls are trying to be shy, and whatever, around everybody. And they don’t want to look foolish, etc.” (2nd Interview). According to Sarah, the boys in her class, “have a tendency to act out in a kind of ‘class clown’ kind of way” (2nd Interview). At one point a male student was having trouble staying on task. Upon reflection, Sarah believed that “the laughing and joking was an attempt to maintain status, to not show any vulnerability, to not show that you’re scared and not sure…” (2nd Interview). Beth also reported shyness and laughter as typical responses that students had when they engaged in improvisation: “ they feel… uncomfortable, so they laugh…and they try to diffuse the discomfort by either making the improvisation funny and about them…or that they’ll just get quiet, or they’ll just kind of hum a drone” (2nd Interview).
4.8.1.3 Participants’ Fears

The participants themselves did not report being fearful of using improvisation. Similarly, I did not observe signs of anxiety or tension when they engaged in improvisation strategies. Sarah talked about writing out some improvisation ideas ahead of time to use with her students as a safety net of sorts when she first started working with improvisation. She does not do this anymore, however. After relaying a story of working with improvisation with a group of students who had not met him before, John admitted that it was a little awkward, initially” (2nd Interview). Beth mentioned that meeting a group for the first time can create anxiety because it is difficult to tailor improvisation strategies to a group you have not met before. Beth imagined that some conductors are likely fearful of “releasing control,” “unstructured time,” and of handing over “creative reign” in the rehearsal (1st and 2nd Interviews) when using improvisation strategies with their students.

4.8.2 Creating and Curating a Safe Space: Mitigating Students’ Fear

4.8.2.1 Let It Be

The participants enlisted a number of strategies to mitigate students’ fear of improvisation. All of the participants discussed the need to set up a safe environment, which corresponds to the literature on this subject (Azzara, 1999; Inks, 2005; Parker, 1976; Pignato, 2010; Riveire, 2006). When I asked Beth about how she mitigated students’ fear, she reflected,

I don’t mitigate it. I just let it be… or maybe I should say it differently: I try to create an environment in which that fear is okay, in which they feel that they can be afraid to take risks and it’s okay…because I can’t take away their fear. I can just make a space where it’s okay to be afraid and do it anyway. (1st Interview)

4.8.2.2 Play

Part of creating and curating this safe space is creating a sense of play where students are encouraged not only to laugh, but also to be silly. For John, “the whole goal is to create an
environment that is fun and playful” (1st Interview). He advised against reacting negatively to students’ laughter. Rather, he laughed with the students, affirming their discomfort. Beth, too, believed that “allowing them to be silly, allowing to diffuse this discomfort by laughter, and not getting frustrated with them” (2nd Interview) were important guidelines to keep in mind. She welcomed laughter, so long as it did not interfere with students’ creations (Beth, Rehearsal observation). Likewise, Sarah told her students who were about to embark on improvisation during one rehearsal, “Just know that this is a place where sounding silly is like the point and it’s A-OK” (Rehearsal observation). She used this mantra with her students to help establish a safe environment just before they were going to improvise for the first time:

(Sarah asks students to repeat after her) I solemnly swear that this circle is a safe place to try things and to make mistakes and to sound ridiculous and to have fun. And I solemnly swear that I will continue to love all of my fellow choristers, even if they say BREEEP BOOP BWAT. That was terrible. (She admonishes the choristers in a joking way) BWEEP BOP BAH. So, even if they make terrible sounds, we will still love them. (Rehearsal observation)

4.8.2.3 Feasibility

The participants all promoted the feasibility of improvisation to their students. Sarah framed improvisation as an invitation to explore: “inside of us, there are a whole host of every sound that we’ve ever heard, and sometimes we just need to be free enough to try out some of those sounds and experiment with them” (Rehearsal observation). Rather than focus on not knowing what to do when improvising, which can cause trepidation for students, Sarah seemed to be suggesting that students are already equipped with musical impulses and ideas that are waiting to be realized by improvising. Sarah’s statement above aligns well with Hickey’s (2009) assertion that improvisation “is a disposition to be enabled and nurtured” (p. 286).

John drew on students’ prior knowledge of familiar melodies, such as children’s songs, as the basis for his improvisation strategies. John also drew on hymn tunes, noting of his students that, “most everybody in this area goes to church and are used to singing hymns” (2nd Interview).
I kind of use what they know because of their culture, background, to help out with some of these exercises. So...whether it’s “Amazing Grace,” or another hymn or even...children’s songs to help them learn just to harmonize...that teaches what I’m looking for. You know, it’s staying within the chord structure. Then, if I go into an improvisation exercise, which is not a song they know, they still understand. “Oh, I get it. We’re still staying within the parameters.” (2nd Interview)

Sarah and Beth drew parallels between improvisation and language, corresponding to descriptions of improvisation advanced by Azzara (1991) and Berkowitz (2010). Beth believed “we all have musical ideas. They can start out to be somebody else’s. It’s like language. All the words I’m using have been expressed by somebody else” (2nd Interview). In introducing improvisation to her classes, Sarah had a conversation about breakfast with one of her students. After this exchange she asked the student:

I asked you some questions and you answered me. Did you have a script? Did you know the questions in advance? You just answered me with the information you had. This is what improvisation is. We all improvise all day, every day… (Rehearsal observation)

She asked the students if they speak with students and teachers at school in English, knowing that for many of them, English is an additional language. “So that’s improvising in another language. When we talk about improvising in music that’s all we’re doing” (Rehearsal observation).

After students in both of Sarah’s classes did some initial explorations with improvisation, Sarah asked, “Was this difficult? Was it easy?” (Rehearsal observation). Perhaps these questions helped students to realize that improvisation was not as daunting as they may have believed it to be initially. In posing these questions, Sarah helped to allay students’ fears by minimizing the perceived difficulty of the improvisation strategies she and her students explored.
4.8.2.5 Modelling

Modelling was another important tool that the three participants used to create a safe space. This took on a variety of forms. John gave his students some ideas to play with before the students start a strategy:

I don’t want anybody to ever think that they’re wrong. So, I avoid putting them in a situation that’s wrong. I try to show them what I’m looking for before I ask them to try ‘cause I want them to succeed. (2nd Interview)

On a few occasions, John modelled some sample gambits for students based on one note, implying that even singing one note is perfectly fine. Sarah also modelled several examples of what students could do before giving them time to play with a strategy.

Modelling was not limited to demonstrating a few sample responses. All three participants actively participated in the improvisation sessions with their students at one point or another. Sarah participated in the student group improvisations, weaving in and out of the groups as she circulated the room. I observed Beth participate in initial forays with her students as well. After introducing several riffs for a South African song, John sang along with his students, inviting them to join him. John reported having participated in an improvisation with his choristers during a performance as well.

In our conversations about creating a safe space, each participant stressed the importance of participating in the improvisations themselves.

It’s important to be vulnerable yourself and to try them [strategies] out, even if you’re not 100% on these exercises. Or, you know maybe you’re not doing them as well as the kids. It doesn’t matter…there’s certainly times when my kids blow me out of the water when they try something. And I love it. Well, that’s great. But, we’re all in it together. At least that’s my mentality of choir as a whole. It’s not a dictatorship. It’s definitely a democracy. (2nd Interview)
Sarah framed her vulnerability in relation to making mistakes in front of her students:

I think the number one thing for me with improv is to be vulnerable yourself. You’re asking them to be vulnerable, and to risk making mistakes, but if they never ever see them happening from you, it’s harder for them to see how that would have a positive outcome. (2nd Interview)

I think one of the things that they enjoy about doing circle singing with me is seeing me struggle to find a unique or fun melody to give each section, and I do that struggle out loud. I hum and sing things out loud so they can hear my process, so that they can hear that I don’t just spontaneously, immediately create something great. And that I go through a lot of garbage to get something usable.” (2nd Interview)

I, too, witnessed Sarah demonstrate a willingness to make mistakes in front of her students. “I’m going to do that process out loud for you so you can see that it’s okay to make mistakes” (Rehearsal observation).

Similarly, Beth mused, “Sometimes my ideas don’t work and that’s okay; that’s been good for me, too” (1st Interview). I asked Beth to explain what she meant by “good for me.” She responded:

To just be okay with taking a risk, trying something, having it not work. You know, then you just modify and do something else. Like, “Let me try something.” So… for me it models if something doesn’t work, it’s a good model for them to take a risk and try something. (1st Interview)

Beth also talked about her participation in a music collective that specialized in performing improvised music. This was another way she modeled improvising music: “It has been so important for me to put my money where my mouth is and to be in a group that improvises and to perform as a powerful affirmation of what I am… hoping to impart to my students” (1st Interview).
Sarah and John also called on students to demonstrate for each other. On one occasion Sarah chose someone who did not have a lot of experience with improvisation to demonstrate because, as she explained,

I sometimes think it could be intimidating for whom this is less comfortable. So, I deliberately brought someone who was willing to try and is confident, willing to make mistakes, for whom I know it would not damage her if she sang a wrong note. (Follow-up interview)

Sarah wanted the students to see a fellow classmate explore improvisation that would emulate this process from a student’s perspective. Sarah discussed how the class size may have affected whether or not she called on volunteers:

So, I try not to create a situation where they’ll feel put on the spot…because that class is so small there really is just a handful, maybe one or two kids, who I feel would confidently, comfortably share what they might be working on and I didn’t want to create a situation where it’s like, “Well, Catherine and Philip always get it right.” And then the rest of them feel like they’re not quite measuring up, you know?” (Follow-up interview)

Beth frequently employed small groups who took turns improvising for each other, so that learning from each other was a given. I observed students utilizing material that they had heard in previous groups, suggesting the transmission of ideas amongst students. John believed that students learned from each other as well.

Let’s see if I can get this person to do a little better by listening to this person…Again, you learn from those who are already pretty successful at it and you give the people who are a little bit afraid a chance to learn by listening. (2nd Interview)
The three participants also felt that students who were reluctant to improvise benefitted from watching others, as this encouraged them to be vulnerable. Sarah asserted:

> The kids who have seen success are more willing to do things like, try out for a solo, or, you know, suggest a musical interpretation of the music in class…But, seeing the risk taking and also seeing [that] the risk taking…doesn’t result in shunning from the community…That there is positive feedback loop, where you feel safe taking some steps yourself. It might not be the same kind of step, but it builds… a feeling where you are willing to make yourself vulnerable ‘cause you won’t feel rejected by this community. (1st Interview)

Beth, too, recognized the value of choristers watching other choristers improvise.

> So the ones that are afraid, but take the risk to improvise either with me or with their group, always come back and say how much fun it was… And then they encourage the others that are resisting to try it, and some people then are able to get over their fear. (2nd Interview).

Using students as models for improvisation in choral settings to develop students’ confidence with improvisation, as outlined by the participants above, corresponds to Hirschorn’s (2011) findings regarding the value of enlisting peer modelling to demonstrate vocal improvisation. Hirschorn believes that this strategy was helpful in promoting students’ self-efficacy, i.e., “one’s beliefs in their musical capabilities and musical competencies which we bring into new musical situations” (Hirschorn, 2011, p. 4). It seems that participants’ anecdotal observations of the effectiveness of peer modelling confirms Hirschorn’s findings:

> Peer vicarious experience was a powerful efficacy source in this study…The significance of peer vicarious experience can be understood in light of previous research…which suggests that modeling, particularly from individuals perceived to be of similar ability, plays a powerful role in shaping self-efficacy beliefs, especially when the domain involves new and challenging tasks (pp. 182-183).
4.8.2.6  An Invitation to Improvise

The ways in which students are invited to sing is also of critical importance. John illustrated the risk involved in inviting students to participate:

You know, it’s a fine line between callin’ people out to do things like improvisation ‘cause you don’t want to embarrass them and ruin their life. But you also want to encourage them to step out of their boxes. So, that’s just an intuitive thing. (2nd Interview).

As they start to know me and I know them—I’ll read them. And I don’t want to torture anybody, obviously, but if I feel like they’re just needing a little nudge, I’ll say, “Would you like to try something?” (1st Interview)

Beth, too, did not put pressure on people to participate. She recognized that not everyone was able to get over their fear of improvising: “I try to create as many opportunities for people to experience that. But, if somebody is terrified…I’m not going to push them” (1st Interview).

Even with those students who have experienced improvisation with Sarah in previous years, she often let these students know in advance that she may be calling on them; otherwise, she asked for volunteers. She did not make anyone do anything. I observed on one occasion Sarah asking a student to join in and the student respectfully declined. Sarah just said, “Okay” and moved on. In other words, she did not cajole the student to participate. Interestingly though, she did remark that sometimes people whom she did not think would volunteer to participate raised their hands.

4.8.2.7  Affirmation

Positive feedback plays a key role in creating a safe environment, in particular with the notion of being wrong.
I never let the students know that something is good and bad when it comes to improvisation. And that’s an important part of improvisation: There are no wrong answers. And that’s what I tell students. Otherwise, you won’t get ‘em to try things. (2nd Interview)

Similarly, I observed Sarah reassuring her students’ attempts at improvisation. When one student in Sarah’s class complained that she got it wrong, Sarah responded, “No, no, no, there’s no wrong here, we’re just trying things” (Rehearsal observation). Another student, after hearing someone improvise, lamented, “How do I top that?” Sarah replied, “You don’t have to. Just do your own thing.” (Rehearsal observation)

While there are no wrong answers, John conceded that with improvisation, “some people have it down a little better” (2nd Interview). He explained, “it may sound awful at first, you know, or simple at least, or whatever, and I praise it. I love it. What they did was great” (1st Interview). “No matter what it sounds like to your musical brain, it is absolutely perfect, at least in the words that you say to them, because you can’t ask them to express and then tell them it’s not quite right” (2nd Interview).

If there are no wrong answers, then everyone’s response is “right.” Sarah used terms like beautiful and perfect to talk to students about their work. Perfect in this context was not used as an evaluation of the students’ creation, but rather to affirm that the student has improvised within the given parameters set forth by the teacher. I did not observe Beth using evaluative comments when speaking with her students about their improvisations. Rather, her feedback affirmed students’ observations: “It’s good that you are self-aware” (Rehearsal observations). When one student talked about the tendency to resort to tonal structures, she said that happens often. There was never a sense that some groups or one student was more correct than others. Rather, Beth opted for more deliberately neutral praise and open-ended statements directed at everyone: “That
was interesting,” “You’re getting better at silence,” and “We’ll see where this takes us” (Rehearsal observations).

4.8.2.8 Other Strategies

There were several other factors that helped create a safe environment. The body language the participants used to convey feedback played an important role. Affirmative gestures like smiles and nods were employed frequently. Class formations also helped to diminish anxiety. The circle formation has already been mentioned as a way of reflecting support. Sarah also asked students in a smaller section to spread out throughout the classroom and to face the wall. She did this so that students could hear their sounds bouncing back at them, and so that they had an opportunity to hear themselves. She even played accompaniment tracks at a loud level, so that other peoples’ individual voices could not be heard:

I wanted them to hear only themselves. So, it was kind of a security measure that even if they stop singing for a moment and there was someone you know, the next person on the wall, they could hear that they couldn’t hear that person and therefore feel safe that they also couldn’t be heard when they were making kind of primary explorations.” (Sarah, Additional interview)

Asking or signaling for applause after students modelled for each other was another strategy that all three participants used to help foster a supportive and therefore safe environment.

4.8.2.9 Working with Reluctant Participants

When I asked the participants if they had ever had a student refuse to participate in improvisation strategies, they all said no. John conceded that he’s “had some be fearful longer than others…” (1st Interview). He further explained,
But I don’t push it. Again, it’s creating a welcoming, playful environment. And I read people well and I can see the people who are just terrified that I’m going to call on them or something, and… I think that’s important. I invite people. I will ask very politely if you wanna try it, but if they say “no,” “Alright, let’s have you [someone else] do it.” And… by the end of the process, whether it’s a semester or year, whatever, I’ve never had somebody say, “No, I’m not going to do it.” Everybody’s always tried it. (1st Interview)

As mentioned above, all three participants reported laughter as a reaction to improvising. John recalled an instance when he was trying the Eric Whitacre exercise (See Appendix G) with members of the university men’s choir who had not worked with him before.

Initially their response was a pushback. And, you know, they’re trying to be cool guys and all of that kind of stuff…and so they’re laughing and they’re kind of mocking the exercise. And what’s important is that you don’t react to that, you know? I say, “Yeah, I know sometimes it’s kind of funny, you know so, just hang with me…and let’s just see what happens.” And if they giggle or laugh or whatever, I’ll just kind of laugh with them. You know, try not to show that, “I’m serious now, be quiet.” (2nd Interview)

In that same story, John credited some of the success with this strategy to his choral students who had previous experience with improvisation as they helped to lead the Whitacre exercise. “It took my students to kind of lead it, and then a couple of guys bought in to the feeling of it…By the end, there was no laughter. There was no, ‘This is stupid.’” (2nd Interview)

Beth stated that with her community choir, she had some people in the past “flat out refuse,” but eventually they came to enjoy it.

So the ones that are afraid, but take the risk to improvise either with me or with their group always come back and say how much fun it was. And then they encourage the
others that are resisting to try it, and some people then are able to get over their fear. And some people aren’t and that’s…totally okay. (2nd Interview)

Of her university ensemble Chorale, Beth said that because there was so much buy in, those who were more resistant “just get drug along” (1st Interview). This comment sheds light on the effect of class/group size on using improvisation with students. Sarah reported that she had never had a student refuse to engage in improvisation. She recognized, however, the degree to which one person’s reluctance to participate affected the overall atmosphere varied depending on the size of the group. This was one reason why Sarah was careful, when working with smaller groups, to program strategies that ensured immediate success.

John acknowledged that

You don’t always have a class of willing participants. People are a little hesitant. So, you have to kind of ease into it and you have to find the people who are succeeding and are trying it and you highlight them. (2nd Interview)

Oh here, you step forward. And then maybe I’ll sing something with them. And everybody kind of sees that that’s cool. And I’ll see somebody kind of laugh and participate in a positive way and I’ll pull them out and say, “All right, you try it.” And the people are realizing, “Oh, this is kind of cool.” And then there is a moment when I realize okay, I have buy in and then I can move on to the more difficult concepts.” (2nd Interview)

4.9 Implementing Improvisation Part III: Facilitating Success

This section details the ways in which the participants facilitated success with improvisation, with a particular focus on presenting, initiating, troubleshooting, and calibrating improvisation strategies. Moderating students’ feedback was another feature of the participants’ use of improvisation with their students.
4.9.1 Defining Success

4.9.1.1 Criteria

A common theme that I explored with the participants was evaluating the success of improvisation. How does one know when it is working? What does successful improvisation look like? Beth offered the following set of criteria:

I feel like a successful improvisation has an element of risk, has complete acceptance by the people that are improvising together, and total commitment from the people that are improvising together. That can take different forms, but, if those three things are present, then the improvisation will be successful, no matter what the musical outcome is or what style, or what they do. (1st Interview)

Beth also offered this description of a less than unsuccessful improvisation session.

It usually sounds or looks like not everybody is fully invested in their group or communicating well. Or somebody tried something and somebody else didn’t pick it up and the improvisation just kind of, there’s not a real arc to it, it just sort of, kind of starts and then fizzled out…if somebody takes a risk and the group rejects the risk, then it just, it falls flat. It doesn’t go anywhere. (2nd Interview)

Beth outlined other examples of communicating poorly:

If somebody is just singing and they’re not listening to know whether or not somebody else is singing with them, they’re just doing their own thing, that can be frustrating for somebody who is trying to create something with them. (1st Interview).
Conversely, Beth also talked about the tendency for students to “drive” the improvisation (1st Interview). Elsewhere, Beth noted that sometimes, when improvisations don’t work, it’s because somebody doesn’t feel like doing it that day…or, they feel…uncomfortable, so they laugh…and they try to diffuse the discomfort by either making the improvisation funny and about them…or that they’ll just get quiet or they’ll just kind of hum a drone. (2, p. 17)

The scenarios Beth outlined are reminiscent of the parameters of group improvisation outlined by Monk (2013): 1) do not block your partner, 2) do not contradict each other, 3) support the scene, and 4) individual goals are suppressed in favour of advancing the scene (p. 77). Successful improvisation involves “communicating well,” which occurs when members successfully negotiate the balance between individual needs and the corporate needs of the group.

4.9.1.2 Emotional Impact

John attributed success or lack thereof to the degree of emotional impact the students experienced with a particular improvisation strategy. He also highlighted that success with improvisation was unpredictable at times.

You know, there are times when the improvisation exercises move people to tears and I can’t explain why. But there are times when it is very impactful. And then there are other times where you just kinda, “Well, that was nice. Okay, let’s move on…” When I say “work” or “didn’t work,” one time it’s a very emotional experience, and I can see it in the students’ eyes, and then the next time, maybe it’s not so much… (2nd Interview)

4.9.1.3 Staying Within the Lines

Both John and Sarah saw improvisation not working when students were not improvising within the given tonal frame or the parameters of a given style. John characterized these attempts as
“not quite in key, sometimes strained, nothing like the style,” or when you “have people going all over the place and not sticking within the key.” When this happened, “that is a time to teach” (2nd Interview). Elsewhere, he explained:

I mean, the thing that typically happens is that somebody doesn’t understand the idea of staying within a certain scale, you know? They start drifting off into other territory because they don’t have that concept, but, if you rehearse that concept and kind of drill it in—“Now here we’re staying…within these notes,” then it really can’t go wrong. (2nd Interview)

Sarah demonstrated “the idea of staying within a certain scale” with her students. She used repetition to help students’ understanding of the F minor scale in preparation for their work with Lamma Bada Yatathanna. One group sang the drone comprising la and mi, while another group of students sang the F minor scale in ascending and descending order. Only after all of the students spent time with the F minor harmonic scale did she invite students to explore improvising melodic fragments within this sound set.

4.9.1.4 Moving Beyond One’s Comfort Zone

John also believed that people experience success to varying degrees. “When you improvise, it doesn’t always work, right? I think that’s inherent in the idea of it. You’re kind of making up stuff as you go, so it’s not always going to work” (1st Interview). But, ultimately, John saw success with improvisation when students moved beyond their comfort zones: “if they try something, anything, it’s a success. If they’ve taken the step to do anything that’s outside of their box, then I consider that a success” (2nd Interview).

Sarah recognized that “comfort zones” varied from person to person. “Not everyone’s risk taking looks the same, so one kid standing in front of the whole choir and taking a solo might be their risk, but another kid just actually singing audibly is their risk…” (1st Interview).
4.9.1.5 Reflecting on Success

The participants reflected on the role they played in the successful implementation of improvisation strategies. “Sometimes my ideas don’t work and that’s okay; that’s been good for me, too” (Beth, 1st Interview). For Sarah, the success of the strategies depended, in part, on the degree to which they appealed to her: “I’ve found that with the improv games or exercises we’ve tried, I have to really like it—to sell it to the kids. So…if it doesn’t look like fun to me then I’m probably not going to do a good job of selling it to the kids” (1st Interview). Elsewhere, she reflected, “I think the only times that improv have been unsuccessful for me is when I didn’t make it very clear where the fence posts were, so they knew where to operate inside” (2nd Interview).

When an improvisation strategy was less than successful, John confided, “I try not to dwell on why did it work this time and not this time” (John, 2nd Interview). John used to reproach himself, however, when an exercise did not work out:

Initially, I was kind of hard on myself. “Oh, that one didn’t work. Gosh I better work on that one. But over time, I’ve realized this is more than it working or not working.” I mean, there are exercises that work better than others, but I’ll still try those others and sometimes they’re eye-opening. You know, something will happen in those exercises and it’s like, “Wow, that’s just great.” (1st Interview)

Two of the participants offered differing views about whether or not to acknowledge to the students when strategies were not successful. Beth mused,

B: Sometimes my ideas don’t work and that’s okay; that’s been good for me, too.

F: How so?

B: To just be okay with taking a risk, trying something, having it not work. You know, then you just modify and do something else. Like, “Let me try something.” So, for me it
models if something doesn’t work—it’s a good model for them to take a risk and try something and be okay if it doesn’t pan out the way they thought it would. (1st Interview)

Elsewhere, Beth noted, “if we have a round of improvisation that, let’s say, doesn’t work as well… I feel like we need to talk about why and reconfigure and then give a little bit more direction and then try something again” (2nd Interview). John, however, refrained from drawing attention to those times when a strategy did not work out so well.

You never want to show that it didn’t work. You never want to showcase that. I mean, I can leave a rehearsal and say “Well, that one didn’t work. I’ll try something new tomorrow. But, I never showcase that to them. I try to find what was cool about it. And even if it’s just, “Hey that’s really cool. I’m proud of you all for trying it. I’m proud of you all for giving it a whirl. Y’all did something that you’re not used to doing and we created some interesting sounds, didn’t we?” Musically was it cool? No, not so much. But they tried something. It’s important that it’s always a success to them. Whatever happens is a success to them. (2nd Interview)

4.9.2 Intervention

The participants demonstrated similar approaches to intervening after they initiated an improvisation strategy, in that sometimes they chose a “hands-off” approach when choristers improvised. On several occasions, the conductors opted out of the circle or bowed their heads down in silence so as not to pull focus from the students who were improvising.

While watching Sarah, I noticed she circulated the room while students were in small groups, intervening only when she felt they needed help with the strategy or needed help staying on track. She let them explore the parameters of a given strategy first before jumping in. Occasionally, Sarah steered people back on track, reminding them of the parameters, joining in the circle when students began to laugh when it seemed as though the laughter was leading others off task. For the most part, Sarah used words as a last resort. When students start to talk,
she offered, “Best not to talk, best to just do” (Rehearsal observation), or when the creations devolved into talking, she simply joined in the circle to model the strategy in order to keep or redirect the momentum of the strategy.

On one occasion Sarah did, in fact, stop the improvisation experience. She chose to intervene when she felt the safe space during one class using improvisation was jeopardized by saying:

> But, in real conversations, you don’t get to command other people to speak. You only speak when it feels right. You have to let other people have their feelings and their process. This is supposed to be a safe, sharing space…You don’t get to make anyone feel stupid because we’re all beginners. None of us have advanced experience with improv. We’re just letting things happen. (Rehearsal observation)

That Sarah chose to intervene underscored how important it was for Sarah to establish and maintain a safe environment. When I asked Sarah about this intervention with a student she said,

> I probably intervened because…someone had joked or done something that I saw registered with another student, making another student feel less safe or that, you know, someone was maybe making fun of someone else—probably in a good natured way. But, I can’t have that in improv because we need to feel safe to do it properly. (2nd Interview)

While the participants sometimes demonstrated a hands-off approach, both Sarah and John often drove the improvisation strategies by providing certain parameters to include the key, the time signature, feeding a line to a group, and by deciding who and when people will join in. John explained:

> Sometimes I’ll just come up with a line myself. In fact, sometimes, I start it. I just get the line going and maybe have someone add in. Now sometimes I do that exercise by sections, “All basses, I want you to sing this”…And then I add in lines from other parts… (2nd Interview)
When working with ostinatos, John advised,

> If the first person who starts the line, if it doesn’t work, if I can tell that line isn’t going to help the exercise going forward, I might say, “Oh, wait. Let’s just change this part.” So, I’ll take what they did and I’ll change the ending or whatever… the trick there is you have to choose wisely on your first pick because that person has to have some sense of key structure and be able to repeat a line over and over. (2nd Interview)

He chose singers whom he knew would be successful, which in turn helped to ensure the success of the ensuing lines.

Both John and Sarah provided a frame of reference to help students to stay on track. John sometimes asked the accompanist to play the notes of a scale to reinforce the tonal parameters of the strategy. Sarah, too, had a group of students sing through the scale that they were using to improvise, or she played the scale on the piano to reinforce the tonal frame of the strategy while other students improvised.

Beth admitted that it is tempting to try to control the direction of the improvisation. When reflecting on a performance with her students, she described her role as “having to be patient” as students’ creations unfolded, and “having to just allow them to do whatever it is they were doing…without interfering” (2nd Interview). In my observations of Beth, however, I did not see her intervene during an improvisation. She said that if she feels that the choristers are not exploring the parameters she’s given, “I’ll stop them and say, “Let’s talk about what’s happening…how did you interpret what I asked for…so I can get a sense of, okay, did I ask in the right way?”” (2nd Interview). Beth described her role in these experiences: “I try to be very patient and allow them to discover themselves within the process, and I try to set up the environment for them to lead and to discover themselves. So, I think of myself really as a facilitator” (2nd Interview). If the improvisation seems to go off track she stated,
Usually, I throw it to them and ask them what happened…And, if they don’t get to some of the points I’ve considered while listening to them, then I’ll suggest, “How do you feel about this? How did you feel when you presented this idea and then it didn’t go anywhere? What are your ideas for doing this in a different way next time?” (2nd Interview)

Beth relayed one anecdote in which she did not intervene at all. Some students came up to her afterwards to express their frustration with some students who were trying to control the improvisational experiences in their group: “sometimes they’ll come and talk to me about it afterwards like, ‘I don’t know what to do in that situation.’” She reported her response to them as, “It’s okay… You don’t have to do anything, you can just be in that space” (1st Interview).

4.9.3 Calibrating Parameters

“They will do what they are ready to do” (Beth, 1st Interview).

The three participants reported that calibrating parameters was essential for facilitating improvisational experiences. Beth said that with younger ensembles, she has “to give more parameters and more specific guidance for them to be successful” (2nd Interview), in contrast to giving fewer parameters for her more advanced ensembles. For example, Beth may ask each of the singers in a circle to sing a phrase they’ve improvised individually. She may just invite singers in a younger ensemble, however, to improvise by making a sound without the expectation of singing.

For Sarah, class size and experience were important considerations for deciding what strategies she used. Sarah’s period six class comprised roughly ten students who were inexperienced with improvisation. Her period four class featured approximately thirty students who had worked with her before and therefore had some experience with improvisation.
The thing about the period four class is that because there are so many kids who are experienced and leaders in that section, the odd kid who doesn’t feel like…engaging as deeply doesn’t change the overall outcome for the class. Whereas in period six, one kid being fairly withdrawn can kind of put a damper on the activity for everyone. (2nd Interview)

For these reasons, Sarah said, “I think I’m a little bit more cautious with the activities I choose for period six. I chose things where I feel like there is a high chance of success” and have “less…individual risk to personal status” (2nd Interview).

John noticed that, “Sometimes singers are so timid that some of the exercises just don’t get off the ground. But, it’s my job to read that and figure out what’s gonna work and what’s not” (1st Interview). Accordingly, he refrained from using more advanced strategies with the beginning students, especially if it was a group that was not “emotionally mature enough to handle it” (2nd Interview). John spent more time explaining parameters to less experienced singers than he did his advanced group: “I had to explain a little bit more to them to make sure they got the idea of the parameters so that they could succeed.” (2nd Interview). Similarly, if a group was having difficulty with a particular strategy, he modified the parameters. For example, instead of choosing among five notes, he asked students to choose from two notes. John elaborated further:

You have to figure out what can you do and what can’t you do. If you try the Kyrie [See Appendix G] exercise too soon, you’re going to get a lot of blank faces. They’re going to look at you like, “What do you mean I’m supposed to make up something within these boundaries?” I mean a lot of non-musicians don’t understand that, you know? So you have to kind of carefully get into that. But, you know right away if you try something and you see you’re not getting anywhere. Well, then you backtrack. (2nd Interview)
In considering more challenging improvisation strategies, John noted, “You have to wait for the buy-in period...you have to make sure that you have most of the group on your side before you move on” (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview).

4.9.4 Sustaining/Extending Improvisational Experiences

All three participants used techniques to sustain improvisation strategies. John tried to vary strategies as well as vary the people he invited to join in. He also tried not to repeat the some of the strategies such as the Eric Whitacre strategy (See Appendix G), which he described as one of the “more impactful” strategies he has encountered (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview). “I might do it twice in a semester. But, if I did that every rehearsal, it would lose its power, you know?” (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview). When working on the Rhythm Cells and Gestural Circle Singing strategies (See Appendix I), Sarah sectioned off the choir, giving each one a specific melodic or rhythmic cell to concentrate on so that all of the students were engaged in the improvisation strategies. The three participants also offered comments to the students that invited them to extend their musical ideas while improvising: “What note and what vowel do you hear in your head that can enhance the overall sound?” “Can someone come up with a new rhythm?” “Try singing 50% of the time.” (John, Sarah, Beth, Rehearsal Observations).

4.9.5 Debriefing

As mentioned earlier, all three participants reported eliciting feedback from their students, often immediately after working with an improvisation strategy. John described the questions he used with his students after working with the Eric Whitacre exercise (See Appendix G):

“What did you get from that activity?” And I always give them an out, you know, that is was meaningless. I’m happy to entertain that, too. It never has gone that way. Everybody always talks about “Gosh, it just was so cool to hear the vibrations; it was like an ocean of sound within the room.” They have all these different ways of describing the music. (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview)
The last sentence of this quote is worthy of consideration. Giving students opportunities to give feedback provided John with insight into students’ individual experiences of this improvisation strategy, confirming Freer’s (2010) hypothesis that improvisation may “create opportunities for conductors to learn from their singers’ musical capabilities and affinities—those musical characteristics that are rarely acknowledged in the traditional rehearsal environment…” (pp. 22-23)

Sarah’s questions often involved drawing awareness to students’ individual creations in group settings: “Can anyone tell me some things they noticed about their own tries or things that happened in the group?” “Did you have anything that you kept coming back to?” “What else was challenging?”

“I love their feedback,” Beth said. “I’m always asking the students for feedback and for them to process. To think about what just happened and their role in what happened…sometimes I will ask, “How do you feel in the silence? How do you feel about silence?” (2nd Interview).

Other types of questions that Beth posed to the students addressed “what they experienced” and “what they were feeling” (2nd Interview). Additionally, calls for students’ feedback may have served to enhance the safe environment Beth tried to promote with her students:

I almost always ask for feedback like I did today for observations. And I leave that very open. And some people make observations about other people. And some people make observations about themselves. And I try to kind of handle that in a way that everybody feels like they can speak… to create a supportive environment. (1st Interview)
4.10 Benefits of Improvisation in the Choral Setting

The participants offered a number of observations when I asked: “What are the perceived benefits of improvisation?” Sarah and John reported that students demonstrated an increased willingness to move beyond personal comfort zones. John noted that “really, by the end of the semester most anybody is ready to try something” (2nd Interview).

Sarah noted,

I really do see an improvement in, like, willingness to try new things that come up in more traditional settings—willingness to try new languages, willingness to try solos, willingness to try making sounds they find unusual or new. I do find that a lot of my singers then feel free to sing to sing out, instead of trying to hide within the choral sound, to sing out a sound that is a little bit more authentically their own… (1st Interview)

John outlined the benefits of using improvisation with regard to students’ confidence and their development of ensemble skills:

As the semester goes on they get better and better and more confident…that way when we are coming to the literature, people are more willing to discuss their emotions as they are singing the literature. And that just translates all into written music. (2nd Interview)

When I probed him further about this last statement, John explained that the same energy that was generated by working with improvisation is required when singing notated music:

My point is, improvisation allows students to be creative and expressive. The whole process is about playing and having fun. I take what they create and show them how this is exactly what their printed music requires. I will transfer from my “Whitacre” exercise directly into a printed piece that requires the same level of listening and blending skills. When they are not tied to printed music, they are forced to use a different part of their brain. When they accomplish this, I show them that their printed music has to be sung the same way. (E-mail correspondence, September 28th, 2016)
Beth, too, alluded to an increased sense of communication as she described how improvisation has impacted her students’ growth as musicians. Like John, she noted the correlation between improvised and notated music: “expression and the communication seems to have gotten deeper” (1st Interview). She sensed the students have “more ownership of communicating something of themselves through the music” and “more ownership of the ensemble” (1st Interview). When she and her students engaged in a performance comprising notated scores and improvisation experiences, she noted that

many of them [students] said that the improvisation gave the written pieces of music—they related to them more, gave them more meaning. And I sensed that from the podium, that they were communicating more of themselves in the music than they had been when we weren’t improvising. I mean, this is all totally observation. (1st Interview)

Elsewhere, Beth commented on improvisation and an increased sense of communication:

My observation has been that they listen more attentively to each other. They communicate more with each other and with me from the podium… Yeah, it’s really just feeling and hearing, and sensing their sensitivity to my gesture. But, by the time we get to performance, I do feel an increased sense of communication from them” (1st Interview).

Beth also felt that improvisation helped to build a sense of community: “If you’re in a group and you’re taking a risk and that builds a sense of community within the ensemble, which then affects the sound that they make because they’re listening and communicating with each other” (2nd Interview).

Sarah, too, saw the benefits of improvisation as it relates to community:
I find that kids who have seen some success, even if they…haven’t themselves tried, improvising in the group setting, the kids who have seen success are more willing to do things like, try out for a solo, or, you know, suggest a musical interpretation of the music in class. So, it kind of fosters a feeling of everyone’s contribution is worthwhile, everybody has something to contribute...there is a kind of safety that is built when they get a positive response from their peers. And that feeling of safety contributes to the community building among the choristers. (1st Interview)

Sarah’s comments regarding the impact of group improvisation in relation to community building resemble Hirschorn’s (2011) findings regarding improvisation in choral settings:

A number of students also articulated that the structure of simultaneous group improvisation provided interactive peer vicarious experiences that allowed them to respond to ideas from choir members around them with greater anonymity. Peer vicarious experience fostered a sense of musical community, generating multiple forms of creative interaction among choir members. (p. 183)

Both Beth and Sarah alluded to other perceived benefits of improvisation. Aside from the fact that students “listen in a different way,” Beth felt that “they feel the impact and importance of their voice in a different way” (2nd Interview). Sarah noted, “I do find that a lot of my singers then feel free to sing to sing out, instead of trying to hide within the choral sound, to sing out a sound that is a little bit more authentically their own…” (1st Interview)

Beth elaborated further on the notion of finding one’s authentic voice in relation to using improvisation to develop performance skills:

The more experience they’ve had improvising, the more they’re able to follow the, the music, sort of, and allow it to happen. It doesn’t happen that way all of the time. But, they can get that feeling of allowing, surrendering to the music that’s happening. I think that so often we try to control our experiences, based on what we think is happening… rather
than what is actually happening…I think performances happen that way all of the time.
And…we want so much to create a certain experience or a certain aesthetic either for us
or for the audience. So, we’re trying to control the situation. Control the music. Control
our relationship with the other musicians. The more we can release that, then the more, I
think, authentic—like we let ourselves be seen through the music and we’re more able to
connect with what the music actually is rather than what we think it is or what we think it
should be. (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview)

Beth also talked about the personal rewards in adding improvisation to her rehearsal methods.
She was thrilled to witness the ensemble “create themselves independently and experience
themselves as creators of music,” adding that participating in improvisational activities was
“incredibly gratifying” for her (2\textsuperscript{nd} Interview). Another benefit for Beth, she said, was that
balancing the rehearsal to include improvisation strategies has

forced me to become much more process-oriented than product-oriented. So, the process
of rehearsing all of the music—improvising, written music—has become so much more
important than the final product of the performance. The performance is just a part of the
process, rather than, you know, the shining trophy at the end of the cycle. (1\textsuperscript{st} Interview)

Beth’s views underscore Freer’s (2010) observations of the collaborative nature required
between the conductor and choristers when using improvisation in the choral setting:
“Conductors will be more comfortable with collaboration's tradeoffs who are less motivated by
attaining a perfect performance end-product than by practicing a pedagogy that fosters the skills
and the empowerment of the singers as individuals” (pp. 26-27).
4.11 Summary

Chapter Four details the contexts under which the three participants in this study utilized improvisation with their choral students. Just as improvisation is a multi-faceted phenomenon, describing the participants’ use of improvisation embraced a number of perspectives. These included participants’ perceptions of, rationales for, and benefits of implementing improvisation in these settings. Other avenues that I explored with these participants included improvisation strategies, strategies for facilitating improvisation, as well as defining and measuring success with improvisation. These findings serve as a foundation upon which the conclusions and observations in the subsequent chapter are based.
Chapter 5 Conclusions

5.1 Overview of Study

This study examined the work of three choral educators who used improvisation with their choirs. Two participants, John and Beth, taught in university settings. The other participant, Sarah, taught at a secondary school. Six semi-structured interviews and observations of 13 rehearsals (three for John, four for Beth, and six for Sarah as her choir rehearses in two sections) formed the bulk of data collected for this study. I analyzed and coded the data for emerging categories. My analysis yielded answers to the three central questions that guided this study:

1. Why should improvisation be used in choral settings?

2. How can improvisation be used in choral settings?

3. What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings?

5.2 Analysis of Central Question #1 – Why should improvisation be used in choral settings?

5.2.1 Learning to Improvise—Improvising Music to Learn

Each of the participants were asked why they used improvisation in choral settings with specific reference to Campbell’s (2009) tri-partite model of praxis that outlines ways in which improvisation is used in educational settings. Campbell enlists the phrase “Improvising to learn music” (p. 120) to describe how improvisation may be used to help students explore elements of music such as key, scales, metre, and or rhythms. “Learning to improvise music” (p. 120) acknowledges those musics that feature and or are defined by improvisation. “Improvising music to learn” (p. 120) refers to improvising as a way for students to make discoveries about themselves and the world around them.
All participants reported that they used improvisation to help students learn about themselves. For John, improvisation helped to break down choristers’ inhibitions so that the choir could be more cohesive as an ensemble. Improvisation appealed to Beth as an opportunity for choristers to recognize themselves as inherent creators. Sarah used improvisation as a way of welcoming everyone, regardless of choral experience, into the circle of music-making.

Sarah and John also used improvisation as a tool for exploring and highlighting the organizational components of a given composition. Beth acknowledged that further development of musicianship skills was a bi-product of improvisation. That was not her main reason for using improvisation, however. “I believe it does improve their musicianship skills, but that’s not my reason for using improvisation. My primary reason is for them to learn about themselves” (1st Interview).

Sarah and John identified other reasons for incorporating improvisation into their choral rehearsals. They were, for example, committed to exploring improvisation in pieces for which improvisation was an inherent stylistic feature. Sarah and John also used improvisation as a way to engage students during rehearsals. For them, improvisation represented a departure from standard rehearsal routines and provided opportunities to explore music in a playful way.

5.2.2 Perceived Benefits of Improvisation

In an effort to further understand why these participants used improvisation with their choral students, I asked: “What are the perceived benefits of using improvisation?” The participants’ responses to this question were similar. These included an increased willingness to volunteer for opportunities from a wider group of students, individual increase in vocal confidence, improved choral cohesion as a result of individual discovery, enhanced communication via acute listening, responsiveness to conductor gestures, revitalization of notated scores, and more individual investment in music experiences, resulting in more authentic, i.e., personally meaningful
experiences for students. Some of these views are encapsulated in the following observations made by Sarah:

I really do see an improvement in, like, willingness to try new things that come up in more traditional settings—willingness to try new languages, willingness to try solos, willingness to try making sounds they find unusual or, or new. I do find that a lot of my singers then feel free to sing to, instead of trying to hide within the choral sound, to sing out a sound that is a little bit more authentically their own…which I think generally leads to better vocal technique rather than kind of constantly trying to hide within the context of the choir, you know, or hide behind the choir. I do find that it has a benefit in confidence. I find that kids who have seen some success, even if they…haven’t themselves tried improvising in the group setting—the kids who have seen success are more willing to do things like, try out for a solo, or, you know, suggest a musical interpretation of the music in class. So, it kind of fosters a feeling of everyone’s contribution is worthwhile, everybody has something to contribute. I have found that there is a kind of safety that is built when they get a positive response from their peers. And that feeling of safety contributes to the community building among the choristers. (Sarah, 1st Interview)

These observations confirm results gleaned from Hirschorn (2011), who concluded that his work with improvisation had a positive effect on his middle-school aged choral students’ own perceptions of their vocal abilities. Similarly, Yun and Willingham’s (2014) observations regarding “empathic attunement” (Seddon, 2005, p. 50), vis-à-vis Oliveros’s (n.d.) concept of deep listening correspond to the participants’ perceived benefits with regard to choral cohesion.

5.2.3 Countering Limitations of the Choral Paradigm

An unexpected grouping of findings to have emerged from engaging with these conductors was a recognition of some key limitations of the choral paradigm. These included an emphasis on performance, uninspired warm-up routines, an over-reliance on the notated score, and an
overemphasis on technical issues. In this light, improvisation was seen as an antidote to some of these limitations and as a way to revitalize the choral rehearsal.

My point is, improvisation allows students to be creative and expressive. The whole process is about playing and having fun. I take what they create and show them how this is exactly what their printed music requires. I will transfer from my “Whitacre” [See Appendix G] exercise directly into a printed piece that requires the same level of listening and blending skills. When they are not tied to printed music, they are forced to use a different part of their brain. When they accomplish this, I show them that their printed music has to be sung the same way. (John, E-mail correspondence, September 28th, 2016)

5.3 Analysis of central question #2 – How can improvisation be used in choral settings?

The results gleaned from answering the second central question of this study speak directly to pedagogical concerns. These include strategies, procedural/informal knowledge, and evaluation. Equally important are the conditions under which teachers foster improvisation, a topic which I examine in the following section.

5.3.1 Strategies

While the strategies participants used varied (See Appendices G, H, and I), their approach to working with improvisation was similar in that they reported using improvisation on a consistent basis throughout the academic year. A key difference regarding usage, however, was that Beth and John tended to use improvisation at the beginning of their rehearsals, while Sarah devoted at least half of a period of one rehearsal per rehearsal cycle to improvisation. Beth’s and John’s use of improvisation affirms Bell’s (2004), Freer’s (2010), and Snow and Apfelstadt’s (2002) recommendation to use improvisation in the warm-up portion of rehearsals.
Although the strategies the participants used were distinct from each other, John’s and Sarah’s strategies shared similar features. Sarah and John used material from the repertoire being studied as the basis for some of the strategies. As well, both Sarah and John used improvisational strategies to teach students about conducting gestures, specifically, their conducting gestures. Beth did not reference targeting conducting gestures in our conversations, but she did use a strategy whereby students were asked to improvise according to her gestures. She believed, however, that a resulting benefit of exploring improvisation with her students was that they became more responsive to her and her gestures:

F.: You said, “It allows them to listen more attentively and communicate with each other and communicate with me from the podium? And how does that manifest itself? How do you know that there has been a difference?
Beth: Yeah, it’s really just feeling and hearing, and sensing their sensitivity to my gesture.
F: Ok, so, do you notice that they are watching you a lot more?
B: Um, it’s gradual and it happens over the course of a semester…But, by the time we get to performance, I do feel an increased sense of communication from them. (1st Interview)

The number of parameters the participants offered to their students varied. John emphasized the need for students to explore a variety of strategies that explored a range of parameters. This approach corresponds to Waterman and Jackson’s (2010) recommendation to offer a balance of freer and structured forms of improvisation (p. 8). Of the strategies I observed, however, John and Sarah tended to use stricter forms of improvisation compared to Beth. Many of Sarah and John’s strategies were rooted in tonality. While Beth’s students frequently utilized tonal structures, she herself did not propose the students’ tonality. In fact, Beth provided the fewest parameters to students. While she offered structural suggestions, such as considering that improvisations have a beginning, middle, and end, she did not prescribe any tonal, melodic, or rhythmic structures for the students. In this light, Beth consistently explored freer forms of improvisation more than the other participants did in this study.
The degree to which the participants themselves led the strategies differed among the three participants. Sarah began with teacher-led instructions, gradually releasing control of the strategies to let students explore them on their own. This was evidenced by non-verbal monitoring of experiences, i.e., joining in or stepping away from circles. In one session, Sarah walked away to check papers on her desk. This behaviour is similar to Waterman and Jackson’s (2010) strategy of leaving the room entirely while students improvised (p. 8). John’s strategies tended to be teacher-led. He often modelled possible ideas, and added or modified parameters while students were improvising, inviting students or groups of students to join in, for example. A possible reason for these teacher-led interventions is the desire to scaffold information to students for whom improvisation is new, so that they can experience immediate success: “I don’t want anybody to ever think that they’re wrong. So, I avoid putting them in a situation that’s wrong. I try to show them what I’m looking for before I ask them to try…’cause I want them to succeed” (2nd Interview).

Nobody likes to fail. Nobody likes to do something and then have it not work. And so, I try to avoid that…I try to ensure that there’s success right away. And so with them [women’s choir members], you know, I thought if I just let ‘em go like I do with Chorale, they’re not gonna get it. So, I had to explain a little bit more to them to make sure they got the idea of the parameters, so that they could succeed. (John, 2nd Interview)

Beth adopted a hands-off approach, suggesting a grouping and then left the students to improvise. While Beth admitted that it was tempting to modify what the students were creating, she exercised patience, allowing students to work out issues themselves. If resolution was not forthcoming, she used indirect questions to guide them to the answers they needed to solve the problem.

While the circle formation was common in all three settings I observed, the manner in which students were organized varied among the participants. Burnard (2000a) recommended not only that educators provide students with varied strategies, but that they work with varied groupings when improvising. Beth’s students took turns performing duets or in small groups while the rest
of the chorus observed. Often in John’s and Sarah’s settings, students improvised in a large group. When students were grouped into smaller groups or in partners, the groups improvised concurrently. Sometimes Sarah called on a small group of students to improvise after they had explored a strategy while the rest of the students looked on, as a way to model how this strategy might be realized. Unlike those of John and Sarah, the majority of improvised activities that I observed during Beth’s rehearsals were performed in succession, so that only one group performed while the rest of the students observed.

The sources for the strategies that the participants cited included jazz methods books, books of children’s songs, Jeffrey Agrell’s (2008) *Improvisation Games for Classical Musicians* and Nachmanovitch’s (2005) *On Teaching Improvisation*. The first two sources are noteworthy, as they are more aligned with a type of idiomatic improvisation advocated by Azzara (2008) and Gordon (2003). Agrell’s compendium also features a number of strategies to support idiomatic improvisation that are rooted in tonal and harmonic patterns.

Even though the participants referred to external resources for improvisation, the participants tended to utilize a set of tried-and-true strategies, adapting and modifying these as needed. These observations correspond to Dove (2016), who acknowledges that although “the workshop facilitator should have a repertoire to draw from…much of the repertoire…might be formed in response to the contributions of the participating cocreators and the needs of the moment” (p. 187). A common adaptation to which the participants adhered is that students with less experience needed more parameters, while those who have had more experience with improvisation could be challenged by giving fewer parameters.

This necessary flexibility with strategies that the participants described extends to an overall fluid approach to improvisation with their students, which I observed. None of the participants planned out which strategies they would use, choosing to adapt to the situation at hand or “adapt on the fly” (John, 1st Interview). This finding corresponds to Hickey’s (2015) observations of
four university teachers who led courses in free improvisation. She noticed these “pedagogues approached their ensemble rehearsals without a clear plan” (p. 438). It is important to make the distinction, however, that both John’s and Beth’s approach to the rest of their choral rehearsals was not improvisatory. Selection of repertoire and detailed rehearsal plans revealed a methodical approach to rehearsing music. While I did not observe a traditional rehearsal of the students with whom Sarah utilized improvisation, my observations of Sarah working with another one of her choirs confirmed a steady use of traditional rehearsal procedures, including error detection and prescription.

5.3.2 Informal Knowledge

Elliot (1995) describes musicianship as comprising five types of knowledge. One type, informal knowledge, refers to the wisdom gained from experience. The three participants demonstrated their informal knowledge of working with improvisation in a number of ways. Viewed in the context of what successful improvisation looks like to them, the participants offered multiple observations. Beth reported that hallmarks of successful improvisation include a commitment to improvisation, an element of risk, and healthy communication amongst musicians. John believed any type of improvisation was a success, even if the improvisations themselves did not gain traction. Sarah conveyed similar sentiments. She believed that success looks differently for each student, because students’ perceptions of risk are varied.

When they [students] see each other take risks and still be an accepted member of the community, that builds a feeling of safety when it comes to also taking risks. Not everyone’s risk taking looks the same, so, one kid standing in front of the whole choir and taking a solo might be their risk but, another kid just actually singing audibly is their risk. (Sarah, 1st Interview)

On the other hand, both John and Sarah offered reasons for why sometimes improvisational strategies did not seem to gather momentum. John attributed this phenomenon to the ephemeral nature of improvisation itself. John also noted:
Sometimes singers are so timid that some of the exercises just don’t get off the ground. But, it’s my job to read that and figure out what’s gonna work and what’s not. And I try to adapt on the fly. It’s like, “Okay, they’re not ready for that, let’s back up and do this.” (1st Interview)

John also linked students’ success with their adherence to the parameters of the given strategy, particularly with tonal structures. Sarah reported that students were less successful when she herself had not adequately conveyed the parameters within which the students should operate.

5.3.3 Feedback

The degree to which feedback was used and moderated was another aspect of informal knowledge I observed when the participants worked with their students. The nature of the feedback process was similar among all three of the participants, in that they each often asked for feedback from their students immediately after engaging in improvisation strategies. The types of questions the participants posed invited students to consider the merits of a strategy, general observations of how the strategy unfolded, ways in which strategies could be extended, and ways in which strategies emulated conversation. “There are no wrong answers” was a sentiment the participants conveyed during the rehearsals I observed. “Look, improvisation—there’s no really wrong answer” (John, Rehearsal observation). Similarly, John and Sarah used words such as “good” and “great” as a way to affirm students’ improvisational essays. I did not observe Beth using these terms, however. Rather, after students improvised, she probed them about their observations. This mode of feedback corresponds to Waterman’s (2010) description of an ideal facilitator who demonstrates a “non-judgmental attitude” (p. 6) and echoes Hickey’s (2015) observations of four pedagogues using free-improvisation, all of whom avoided “preconceived notions of quality” (p. 440). In this light, perhaps words like “good” and “great” suggest that some of the participants struggled to find adequate vocabulary, i.e., words void of preconceived notions of quality, to facilitate students’ improvisations.
5.3.4 Evaluation

The three participants reported that they did not formally evaluate improvisation; that is, they did not mark choristers on how well they improvised. A key barrier to evaluating students’ improvisation, Beth reported, was that she did not have any formal ways of judging their experiences. This concern echoes those of Freer (2010), and Hickey (2009), both of whom underscore the need for new sets of criteria to evaluate improvisation distinct from qualitative measurements associated with evaluating performances. Another possible reason as to why the participants did not formally evaluate choristers’ improvisations is that improvisation is used a means through which other goals, primarily, self-agency and self-discovery, are achieved.

5.4 Analysis of Central Question #3 - What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings?

Research suggests that improvisation is one of the least embraced NAfME standards in music education (Bell, 2003; Byo, 1999; Lehman, 2008; Schopp, 2006). Similarly, while improvisation appears in several Canadian music curriculum documents, Canadian researcher June Countryman (2009) suggests that many Canadian secondary music programs leave little room for improvisation (p. 94). Anecdotally, the participants confirmed these assertions. The participants were not aware of widespread use of improvisation in choral settings. They also reported that the students with whom they worked had little to no experience with improvisation prior to working with them.

5.4.1 Barriers

Researchers have identified a number of barriers to improvisation, as illustrated in Chapter 2. These can be grouped into two categories: perception of improvisation and challenges to the choral paradigm. Within the perception of improvisation category are three subthemes: consensus on a definition, lack of teacher education, and fear.
5.4.2 Defining Improvisation

Azzara (2002) cites a lack of consensus for defining improvisation as one challenge to its inclusion in music education settings. When I asked the participants to define improvisation, their respective definitions included two salient ingredients of improvisation: spontaneity and creation. This suggests that the participants had a clear notion of the phenomenon of improvisation, yet the strategies the participants used sometimes seemed to reflect an imbalance of these key ingredients. Does choosing to sing one of the first five notes of the major scale constitute creativity or merely choice? Likewise, can we say that students are improvising when the teacher is generating improvisational responses for the students to echo in the moment of performance? Perhaps the very act of questioning these strategies is a way of perpetuating charges of fraudulent improvisation that only serve to muddy our understanding of improvisation itself, and are therefore not warranted. A better question might be, do these strategies engage students in meaningful musical experiences? Based on my observations and those of the participants, the answer is “yes”.

5.4.3 Formal Training

Researchers cite a lack of training as being chief among these barriers to utilizing improvisation (Bernhard & Stringham, 2016; Hickey et al., 2016; Ward-Steinman, 2007). As Lehman (2008) writes, “We cannot teach what we have not learned” (p. 30). The participants in this study reported varying degrees of experience with improvisation, both in their informal and formal music training experiences. The participants’ experience with formal music training in their undergraduate programs provided minimal opportunities to develop their own improvisation skills, confirming Swanson and Campbell’s (2016) and Solis’s (2016) observations that music students at the tertiary levels of study receive little education in improvisation. Despite a lack of exposure to improvisation in their formal training, however, these participants still incorporated it in their teaching. Their strong belief in the value of improvisation outweighed their lack of experience with this way of music-making.
5.4.4 Mitigating Fear

Fear was a recurring topic of discussion in my interviews with the participants. The participants reported that they themselves did not experience fear when working with improvisation. Mitigating students’ fear was a common theme with each of the participants, however. Through interviews and observations, it became apparent to me that sources of students’ fear went beyond “getting it right.” Not measuring up, not knowing what to say, or fear of being ostracized or “voted off” (Pignato 2010, p. 122) constituted other sources of fear. These observations affirm how highly individualized choristers’ experiences with improvisation can be and underscore the need for a variety of strategies in order to address students’ fears.

5.4.5 Creating a Safe Environment

All of the participants reported creating and curating a safe environment as being paramount to the success of improvisation. Creating such an atmosphere helps to destabilize students’ trepidation about improvisation. The three participants offered various approaches to mitigating fear. These included using humour, using the metaphor of language to normalize the act of improvisation, highlighting the feasibility of improvisation, peer and teacher modelling, issuing positive feedback, and enlisting non-threatening ways to invite students to improvise. Beth admitted that she cannot eradicate students’ fear; she can only create a space where it is all right to be fearful (1st Interview). All of the participants reported that students became more comfortable with improvisation with time and experience. The three participants also underscored the importance of teachers being vulnerable in front of their students as one way of modelling risk-taking in a safe environment.

While these findings regarding creating a safe environment may seem fairly straightforward and equally applicable to the traditional choral rehearsal, it is important to bear in mind that the degree of personal risk is far greater for the choral student being asked to improvise than the student who is asked to sing in a traditional choral setting. The traditional setting is most likely more familiar to choral students; that is, they will most likely have had more experience singing standard choral repertoire than with improvisation. Additionally, often choristers sing the same
music along repeatedly with the singers in their section over the course of several rehearsals. As such, the outcomes for choral singing in these settings are perhaps more predictable than “creating music without a predetermined outcome” (Sarah, 2nd Interview). Choristers who are asked to improvise, however, cannot necessarily rely on others for their vocal line, nor will they always be able to predict the outcomes when improvising. Accordingly, although the need to mitigate fear through the means mentioned above may sometimes be required in traditional choral settings, it is imperative when asking students to improvise.

5.4.6 Challenges to the Choral Paradigm

Other barriers to implementing improvisation—size of ensembles, time, performance considerations, and the role of the conductor—are grouped here because grappling with these may challenge our understanding of typical choral settings.

5.4.6.1 Size

The question of the size of large ensembles such as a choir has been identified as a barrier to implementing improvisation (Daley, 2013; Hickey, 2015). While I did observe one class that was made up of ten students, the average size of the groups I observed ranged from 30-50 members. The size of the larger ensembles I observed did not prove to be prohibitive. I believe this is due in part to the large rehearsal spaces to which all three participants had access. Having large rehearsal spaces afforded the participants opportunities to explore circular and small group formations.

5.4.6.2 Time

One of the biggest barriers to utilizing improvisation may be time (Lehman, 2008; Schopp, 2006; Whitcomb, 2013). Performance demands require a large allocation of rehearsal time for learning and preparing repertoire for concerts and music festival appearances. While the participants admitted that there is tension between time for improvisation and meeting other demands of the
program, chiefly upcoming performances, they all reported using improvisation with their students on a regular basis. They further reported that they would dedicate more time to developing improvisation skills with their students if they had fewer performance demands. This underscores the importance the participants ascribed to utilizing improvisation with their students despite the inherent time constraints associated with large performance-based ensembles such as choir.

5.4.6.3 Performance Considerations

Hickey (2009) suggests that a key barrier to the acceptance of free improvisation is that the performance standards that students, administrators, and audience members have come to expect are not realistic performance standards for improvised music. The participants have explored improvisation in performances with their groups, however. This suggests that improvisation may not need to be limited to rehearsal settings only and that the participants are willing to traverse accepted notions of performance expectations to include improvisation in their concerts.

5.4.6.4 The Role of the Choral Conductor Redefined

Several researchers have discussed the teacher’s role in improvisation as that of a facilitator (Burnard, 2000a; Hickey, 2009; Higgins, 2008). Freer (2010) concludes that educators who are already comfortable with mitigating the traditional authoritarian role of the conductor will be better acclimated to using improvisation. All of the participants fostered an environment that was deterritorialized” (Higgins, 2008, p. 329) to varying degrees. Examples of these types of negotiations include utilizing a circle formation as a way to equalize the status of all of the stakeholders involved. The use of circles is endorsed by Waterman and Jackson (2010): “A circle in which everyone playing provides a model for a democratic social group, and such social cohesion is a beneficial aspect of good improvisation workshops” (p. 9). Other examples of a deterritorialized environment include having the conductor abdicate power by stepping out of the circle entirely and demonstrating or participating in improvisational ideas, as the participants did, thereby illustrating the conductors’ willingness to be vulnerable in front of others.

If you kind of sit back and expect them to be vulnerable, sometimes they won’t and then therefore it doesn’t work. But, if you put yourself in a situation where you may be foolish
yourself, that’s a positive…Did I do the descending octave where I just had everybody go (he sings on a “doo” using a d t l s pattern) and then add improvisation? Okay, well, when I first did that, I had the whole choir doing the descending scale. Okay, that’s not a big deal and then I improvised. I just tried out some stuff along that line. And, you know, I’m not quite as good as I am other times. And sometimes it comes out okay and sometimes it doesn’t. Well, the students realize that, “Well, gosh, he’s human too.” (John, 2nd Interview)

The results of this study suggest, however, that redefining the choral conductor’s role in relation to improvisation is not without its tensions. For example, Beth reported that “what I experience when my students are improvising is a desire to control the improvisation” (1st Interview). Likewise, John advised when working with the Ostinato Riff (See Appendix G) strategy to “choose wisely on your first pick” (2nd Interview); that is, choose a singer who can create a musical line with implied harmonies in mind. He added that if the person selected did not choose an ostinato that John felt would generate further improvisational responses, he modified the line: “I might say, ‘Oh wait. Let’s just change this part.’ So, I’ll take what they did and I’ll change the ending of whatever…” (2nd Interview). Can John be accused of controlling the outcomes of the improvisational strategy, or is John, in his role as a facilitator, simply trying to ensure students’ success by using interventions such as selecting a person to improvise an ostinato line or by modifying the line students propose? Both Beth’s and John’s remarks illustrated the challenge of negotiating control when working with improvisation. They also recall Higgins’ (2008, 2012) views on this issue: “There is a fine line between leading and controlling” (2012, p. 148) : “the workshop leader [in this case the conductor] wishes for unconditional openness, but the structure itself is only possible within limits, resources, time, skill, etc.” (2008, p. 328).

5.5 Implications of this Study

This study of three choral educators and their use of improvisation in choral settings yielded pedagogical implications for choral educators.
5.5.1 Overcoming Barriers

One chief implication is that it is possible to utilize improvisation in these settings despite barriers such as time, performance expectations, and training. While the conductors struggled to balance time for improvisation and time for performance preparation, they found ways to include improvisation in their rehearsals and, in some cases, performances. Furthermore, the participants utilized improvisation despite having minimal exposure to improvisation in their formal music training experiences.

5.5.2 Enhancing the Choral Setting

A second implication of using improvisation in choral settings is that the participants’ use of improvisation did not seem to hinder, but rather, enhanced the goals of their ensembles. These goals included musical excellence, acceptance within the group, and harnessing a personal commitment to communicating music. I believe the reason why improvisation has had a positive effect on the ensembles, as reported by the participants, is because the perceived benefits of improvisation are in harmony with typical objectives that choral conductors strive to achieve with singers:

1. Fostering choral cohesion
2. Fostering musical expression both on individual and corporate levels
3. Rendering stylistically accurate performances of music
4. Performing recreated works with empathetic attunement
5. Performing recreated works as though they were being created in the moment of performance

Improvisation as a tool for choral cohesion is not just limited to the quality of the ensemble sound. There are implications for choral cohesion as a social construct. Freer (2010) asks “could it be that the success of vocal improvisations within choral settings is tied to the conductor’s ability to restructure the ensemble’s power structure?” (p. 23). I believe the degree to which
improvisation has been accepted as a mode of music-making within the choral rehearsal “can be seen as both an instrument for and a barometer of cohesion within the choral ensemble” (Farrell, 2016). That choristers are able to improvise with each other is an indication of trust, vulnerability, and acceptance, not only between the conductor and the choristers, but among the choristers themselves.

5.5.3 Implementing Strategies and Fostering Success

This study has shown that utilizing improvisation in choral settings does not conform to a particular sequence or set of strategies. The participants’ reasons for using improvisation, and the strategies they used, were different from each other, suggesting that there is no one way to incorporate improvisation in choral settings.

Another conclusion from this study is that while books of improvisation strategies are important resources, the participants drew from a small repertoire of tried-and-true strategies, adapting and calibrating them as the situation dictated. Accordingly, acquiring a vast library of how-to books on improvisation may not be a pre-requisite to implementing improvisation.

Moreover, the degree to which these participants fostered a safe learning environment was as important, if not more important, than the strategies themselves. This is noteworthy, as some conductors may wrongfully conclude that the act of improvising itself was the chief cause of a lack of success with improvisation. The real reason the strategy did not yield favourable results, however, may be attributed to unclear instructions, too few parameters given, or that the improvising task was too far beyond the students’ comfort level, abilities, or experience. To that end, choral educators wishing to utilize improvisation with students are invited to consult the compendium of strategies found in Appendices G, H, and I. This compendium represents a variety of strategies and includes transcripts of the participants introducing and facilitating these strategies.
Nevertheless, the participants shared common approaches to facilitating improvisation. These included 1) the use of circular formations, 2) offering opportunities for students’ feedback after exploring improvisational strategies, 3) adapting the parameters of an improvisation strategy to the situation at hand, and 4) a willingness to improvise with and for students. Regardless of the strategies, adhering to these four common approaches to facilitating improvisation may help to ensure the successful implementation of improvisation in choral settings.

While the participants did not state this explicitly, they seemed to measure success with improvisation by the level of student engagement and the degree to which a strategy resonated with students. Just as the participants’ strategies varied in this study, however, so did their notions of success. These notions seem inextricably linked to the participants’ rationales for using improvisation. An indicator of success could be the degree to which a student improvised within the given parameters of a pitch set, e.g., minor scale. Success could be measured by the degree to which a student improvised in front of others. Alternatively, an improvisational strategy may be considered successful if students were able to glean information about their learning and understanding of how they engage in music-making or, more broadly speaking, the world around them.

### 5.5.4 Implications for Choral Conductors

The benefits of improvisation in choral settings, as reported in this study, should encourage the choral educator to utilize improvisation, despite the potential barriers of time, space, and fear. Reported and observed benefits and rationales for students include, in no particular order:

- Increased confidence in singing with and for others,
- Increased willingness to volunteer for solos and offer opinions,
- Breaking down social barriers,
• Providing students with opportunities to hear each other’s voices,

• Providing student-led learning opportunities,

• Using improvisation as a gateway or precursor to studying a piece,

• Using improvisation to establish personal connections to the text of a piece,

• Acute listening resulting in opportunities to refine ensemble skills such as balance,

• Providing opportunities for students to explore vocal ranges,

• Providing opportunities to introduce and reinforce musical materials e.g., scale, chord progression,

• Creating a welcoming environment,

• Opportunities to explore stylistic features of pieces featuring improvisation,

• Increased student engagement,

• Developing students’ awareness of their role in the ensemble and the music-making process,

• Providing opportunities for students to discover their ways of understanding and creating music,

• Providing opportunities for students to author their own music,

• Provide opportunities for students to engage in styles of music i.e., pop, that they may not always have a chance to explore in traditional choral settings,

• Create opportunities for immediate access to music-making by circumventing the use of notated scores,

• Create a readiness for a notated score by exploring elements of a score with improvisation before looking at the score,
Increased sensitivity to conductor’s gestures,

Increased sense of communication amongst choristers and the conductor,

Tempering the potential mundaneness of warm-up procedures,

Infusing laughter, levity, and fostering a playful and fun learning environment.

Choral educators themselves may discover ways in which improvisation can affect and enhance their own teaching practices. Beth’s use of improvisation with her students led her to appreciate more the process of learning music in addition to the rewards of a performance. John has used improvisation to assess students’ understanding of a particular style. All of the participants valued students’ feedback after having explored improvisation as these feedback sessions provide opportunities for these educators to find out more about the students they teach as reflected in John’s observation: “They [students] have all these different ways of describing the music” (2nd Interview).

As a practitioner of improvisation myself, I, too, have discovered in my own work with improvisation in choral settings the benefits of improvisation listed above. In particular, improvisation has helped to quickly destabilize social barriers between the students and myself, allowing for more immediate personal and social connections with the students. Improvisation has also helped students to quickly develop and hone their listening skills resulting in a more refined sense of choral balance and communication than I have experienced using traditional strategies to affect these ensemble goals.

I also believe working with improvisation has enhanced my teaching practices. I have found that improvisation yields insights into students’ individual capabilities that may have otherwise been difficult to ascertain in traditional choral settings. Using improvisation has also challenged me to better balance performance demands with other goals of the choral ensemble, chiefly to enable
students to become better musicians. Lastly, in working with improvisation, I am encouraged to take more risks in my teaching, to try strategies, regardless of the outcome.

Considering improvisation may cause trepidation for choral educators, however, because it forces them to confront their beliefs about the priorities of their particular choral settings. What is the role of the conductor, the role of choristers, and the degree to which performance is prioritized? Answers to these questions often dictate how time is allocated in rehearsals. Given the fluidity of the strategies, conductors need to be flexible with time in rehearsals, as illustrated in Beth’s remarks, “sometimes we get into the improvisation and I let it go much longer because things just come up” (2nd Interview).

In addition to time management, there are a lot of unknowns when working with improvisation in choral settings, which may also dissuade the choral educator from working with improvisation. For example, it is true that “conductors may sense…tension between the identifiable correctness of musical re-creation and the ambiguous correctness of spontaneous musical creation,” (Freer, 2010, p. 21). The participants’ thoughts on what makes improvisation successful may shed light on this ambiguity, however.

It is also worth considering that the participants reported that there are times when improvisational excursions may not always be met with success. This may pose a challenge to those seasoned choral educators who have developed effective time-management strategies, whose strategies are met with predicted success, and whose performances have garnered widespread acclaim. While choral singing is a collaborative effort, the conductor’s ability to manage and control both rehearsal and performance outcomes is a contributing factor to the ensemble’s success. This mode of operation is not compatible with both the ephemeral and unpredictable nature of improvisation, however.
It is also likely that conductors will be challenged by developing yet another skill set, especially when years of training and experience within the traditional choral paradigm has yielded success in this arena. Yet the skills needed to facilitate musical improvisation parallel those conductors will have most likely already developed. Conductors are asked to respond in the moment to situations as they unfold, despite formulated rehearsal plans. As John and Sarah noted, success with improvisation is sometimes dependent on guiding students through a set of given musical parameters. Similarly, conductors rectify incorrect note issues when they point out that a pitch does not fit into the required pitch set, i.e., key signature. Conductors often gravitate to pieces in which the composer demonstrates an acute ability to organize musical components of a piece. Likewise, becoming acquainted with both stylistic and structural features of a piece typifies the score preparation process for many conductors. Knowledge of how choral textures are utilized and manipulated through form, rhythm, harmony, and melody may help conductors facilitate freer forms of improvisation with their students. Acquiring the skills needed to facilitate improvisation may not be as distant a goal as one may think.

5.6 Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study that concern data collection. Firstly, problems with recording devices rendered on occasion some sentences as inaudible or partially audible for one of the interviews I conducted, as well as one rehearsal I observed via Skype. Drawing from multiple sources of data helped to mitigate these technical issues, however.

Secondly, in the future, I will refine my interview techniques by limiting my interjections during interviews. Remarks such as, “I’m not sure if this is exactly what you’re looking for” (Sarah, 1st Interview), and, “Yeah, I think I can get closer to your question” (John, 2nd Interview) suggest that some of the questions I posed were not as open-ended as I had intended, which may have influenced participants’ responses.
Thirdly, while I made efforts to remain a passive observer in rehearsals, I was introduced to choristers by all of the participants. My presence may have had an effect on the way improvisation was utilized. For example, John explained that he tried some new and advanced strategies with one of the choirs I observed because, “I knew you were observing…so, I wanted you to see things” (John, 2nd Interview). This is one example where the naturalistic setting I had hoped to observe may have been compromised by my presence.

Fourthly, several limitations of this study are linked to the scheduling and scope of the interviews with the participants. Due to circumstances beyond my control, I was unable to interview participants at similar intervals. As well, it is important to keep in mind that for each participant, I officially observed only three rehearsals. The conclusions are limited to those observations. Interviewing the participants on two separate occasions, however, did help to qualify my observations. Furthermore, because I did not interview students for this study, but only their teachers, any insights on students’ progress with improvisation were based on the participants’ anecdotal observations of choristers.

Finally, while the participants reported little, if any, resistance from their students regarding the use of improvisation, it would be difficult to attribute this attitude towards improvisation to the teacher’s ability to foster a safe environment and utilize strategies alone. The successful use of improvisation in these settings may be attributed to, in part, a number of variables including the extent to which choral courses are either a requirement or an elective, the fact that students are issued a grade or a mark in these courses, musical training, age, and performance experience.

5.7 Recommendations for Implementing Improvisation

5.7.1 To Define or Discover?

As more educators embrace improvisation, we should dis-arm negative connotations of the word itself. The often cited quote by Bailey (1980): “improvised music enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practiced of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and
understood” (p. 1) destabilizes gains in our understanding of improvisation as a widely acknowledged and understood phenomenon as discussed in Chapter 2. Quotes like Bailey’s only perpetuate outdated and negative beliefs about the nature of improvisation and may serve to dissuade educators from engaging with this form of music-making.

Perhaps moving the discussion of improvisation beyond the merits of one definition over another or one type of improvisation over another type would allow us to focus on other pertinent pedagogical issues. Research indicates divided opinions, for example, on which approach to improvisation, structured or free, is more pedagogically sound. Framing improvisation as a continuum would negate such arguments. If we accept that improvisation embraces a wide berth of possibilities, we can move beyond casting aspersions on strategies because of their absence or presence of parameters and beyond precise definitions of improvisation to focusing on improvising with students and discovering the ways in which improvisation can be utilized to engage students in meaningful musical experiences. These sentiments are reflected in Solis’ (2016) observations of working with graduate students in Music Education. Solis noted that the students tended to “bracket off the notion of improvisation to some degree,” citing that their preconceived notions of improvisation did not coincide with their creations (p. 102), further noting that “they resisted such language because it did not seem relevant to the questions about creative musicality in the moment of playing” (p. 102).

5.7.2 Implementing Improvisational Strategies in Choral Settings

The conductor’s consideration of improvisation strategies should be guided by several key factors. Firstly, using Campbell’s (2009) tri-partite structure will inform which strategies to use and, at the very least, help conductors determine their reasons for utilizing improvisation and how success with this phenomenon may be measured. Secondly, the degree to which choral educators utilize parameters may help to secure success with improvisation. Students with less experience may benefit from strategies that have more parameters.
On the other hand, choral educators should be encouraged to explore improvisational strategies that feature freer forms of improvisational investigation. To that end, the choral educator should embrace all types of improvisation experiences ranging from structured to free forms of improvisation. Just as the choral educator seeks to provide choristers with a variety of choral repertoire, so too should choristers be provided with a variety of improvisational strategies.

Fourthly, choral educators should monitor the degree to which improvisational strategies are teacher-led. Choral educators should give due consideration to how much the students themselves will be actively involved in the spontaneous creation of music in the moment of performance. As a way to ease novice improvisers into improvisation, however, educators may want to begin with strategies that are teacher-reliant, gradually giving students more opportunities to lead and facilitate these strategies. Moreover, unlike in choral settings where choral educators are not necessarily required to vocally model desired outcomes (although modelling is ideal), teachers themselves have to be willing to participate in these improvisational strategies. Fifthly, strategies should be designed that keep in mind the degree of personal risk students are asked to take. There may be singers who may be slow to fully participate in improvisational strategies. Those who are new to improvisation may not feel as comfortable singing in front of the whole ensemble as they would singing in a small group, for example. Cajoling these singers is not recommended. Accordingly, exploring a variety of formations, i.e., large circle, concentric circles, duets, small groups, individuals spread throughout the room, is recommended.

Lastly, we may want to consider using a word other than strategies to describe the ways in which we implement improvisation, as this word can connote fixed and formulaic approaches that yield predictable outcomes. Niknafs (2013a) proposes the term entry points (p. 32) when discussing strategies for promoting free improvisation in the general music classroom. The entry points she describes are not meant to be “step-by step instructions” (p. 23). Rather, they seem to represent points of departure that are used to generate and foster improvisation. Moreover, the entry points
Niknafs outlines can be tailored to suit the needs of the students (2013a, p. 23). In this light, entry points in lieu of the term strategies may better reflect both the fluid conditions under which improvising with students often occurs, as well as the unpredictable nature of improvisation itself.

5.7.3 Transference

Establishing more connections between improvisation and the repertoire studied may entice choral conductors to utilize improvisation in choral settings. A compendium of suggested improvisation strategies for standard choral selections may also encourage choral educators to pursue improvisation with choristers (See Appendix L). Working with typical ornament patterns used in Renaissance choral music in addition to programming a Renaissance piece would be one way to realize the performance practices of this genre of music, for example. Devoting more time to improvising techniques that are inherent to styles of music being studied is another way to create openings for this educational tool.

Perhaps explorations in improvisation may even lead to innovative understandings of notated scores. After a session of free improvisation, the conductor can pose several questions such as, “How did you establish the structure in your explorations?” “What musical idea did you use to generate further musical ideas?” Or, using terms cited by Monk (2013), “What role were you assuming in this improvisation, punctuating or affirming?” The conductor can then ask the same questions about a notated score. “What is the structure of this piece?” “What is the generative musical idea in this score or in this section?” “What kind of role do the sopranos play in composition x?” “Who is playing a supportive role in the composer’s work?” “Find an example of punctuating an idea in composition y.”

John used improvisation as a precursor to a notated score his students were about to explore. He asked the students to improvise harmonies to “Amazing Grace” and then worked on an arrangement of “Bright Morning Stars,” believing this had a direct impact on their understanding
of the latter, as both of these hymns evoke similar moods. Key to this and the above-mentioned example is the idea of transference. In the example above, students were given opportunities to directly transfer their experiences with improvisation to the printed score, perhaps allowing for more personalized, or at the very least more meaningful, connections to the music at hand. Moreover, making these implicit connections between improvisation strategies and the repertoire explicit to the students will help to ensure that students are connecting their experiences with improvisation to their understanding of the music they are studying. Explicit references to transference when using improvisation will also help to underscore the role improvisation can play in realizing outcomes of a rehearsal and overall ensemble goals.

5.7.4 Audiation

A greater emphasis on audiation techniques as advocated by both Azzara (1991) and also Gordon (2003) may be another way choral educators can develop students’ improvisational abilities. If we accept that “music aptitude is one’s potential to audiate” (Azzara 1991, p. 108), developing audiation skills can play a significant role in the development of good musicianship skills while at the same time fostering a readiness for improvisation. Moreover, Gordon’s (2003) and Azzara’s (2008) approach to improvisation may also appeal to those choral conductors who may be reluctant to work with freer forms of improvisation. This suggestion also affirms that improvisation in choral settings will enhance other skills conductors hope to develop in their students.

5.7.5 Facilitating Improvisation

There are many how-to articles, chapters, and books dedicated to improvisation whose main pedagogical focus is the strategies themselves. More guidelines for facilitating and sustaining improvisational strategies, however, would help with our understanding of how to teach this phenomenon and to foster students’ competency with improvisation. This echoes Hickey’s (2015) concern that “Preservice teachers need practice providing nonqualitative feedback and stimulating rich discussion among ensemble members” (p. 441). This underscores the need for models for pre-service teachers to emulate as discussed below. Notable resources in this vein are

5.7.6 Evaluation

While improvisation can be used as a type of evaluation, evaluation of improvisation itself should be limited to self-evaluation and reflection. Assigning a grade or numeric value to student improvisations may only inhibit students’ responses and reinforce notions of correctness that contravene the ephemeral nature of improvisation. Asking students to evaluate their own improvisations, however, may help them to identify their unique approaches to music-making as well as other materials and procedures they can pursue to develop their skills as improvisers. This approach to evaluation is reflected in the 2014 NAfME Ensemble Standards (NAfME, 2014).

5.7.7 Performing

Lastly, choral educators should consider programming improvisational opportunities for choristers in performances. Not only would this provide unique performance experiences for the choristers and audience members alike, but featuring improvisation in performances may help to garner more widespread appeal for improvisation in traditional choral settings.

5.8 Recommendations for Teacher Education

5.8.1 Teacher Education

As the study of improvisation continues to grow, calls for the implementation of improvisation as part of teacher education, as well as formal music education at the tertiary levels, are reaching a larger audience. Ward-Steinman’s (2014) study of 24 choral music education students who developed confidence in teaching improvisation after a round of eight 50-minute sessions on
vocal improvisation underscores at least one area of improvising that still needs improvement, however. The findings of that study suggest that although students’ confidence in teaching improvisation increased, their ability to improvise notes that adhere to the parameters of the given chords did not improve. The implications of this finding are far reaching. What are the necessary skills needed to facilitate structured improvisation and freer forms of improvisation? The answer to this question may help inform how improvisation at tertiary levels of study can be realized.

5.8.2 Musicianship Skills and Technique

Ward-Steinman (2015) notes that the three “distinct factors underlying improvisational skill” (p. 47) are “the creative or inventive use of dynamics, range, tone color, articulations, lyrics, melodies, and rhythms…knowledge of jazz style”, and “…good musicianship” (p. 47). Perhaps Kratus’s (2007) statement about embracing change in the education system is appropriate here as well: “One wonders whether our profession’s resistance to change is a direct result of the limitation in the musicianship we have been taught” (p. 45). Accordingly, I propose that a greater emphasis on aural training in undergraduate programs may equip students with a necessary knowledge base upon which to draw when improvising. Part of developing this knowledge base involves experimenting with referents such as scales, chords and rhythms. This type of aural training, which is not unlike the type of training jazz musicians receive in undergraduate programs, fosters contextualized learning, so that a major scale, for example, is understood as it relates to harmonic underpinnings of each tone.

Hickey (2015) notes that participants in her study enjoyed success in their free-improvisation collegiate ensembles because “they acquired advanced skills on their instruments,” allowing them to “express their musical selves in the moment using the technical and aural skills they had honed up to this point” (p. 440). Her recommendation for K-12 music instruction can be equally applied to tertiary settings:

The technical and aural skill of being able to state musically on an instrument or voice that which is intended is one that needs to be strengthened in traditional K-12 music
education, where current emphasis tends to be on note reading. And this technical and aural learning can and should be situated within ensemble growth. (p. 440)

Hickey’s call for more robust aural and technical skills training in music ensembles also highlights the important role large ensembles such as choirs can play in fostering improvisation skills.

5.9 Suggestions for Further Research

There are a number of avenues of research to pursue in relation to improvisation in choral settings. For example, in order to understand the scope of current practices, a survey of choral educators at national choral conferences such as those offered by the American Choral Conductors Association (ACDA) and Choral Canada (called “Podium”) may shed additional light on the degree to which choral educators currently utilize improvisation.

More models for implementing improvisation in choral settings are needed. While there are some online resources that explore this topic (See Appendix J), more accounts from choral conductors using improvisation in choral settings would mitigate this gap in research as well. These accounts may form the basis of a qualitative study that examines a conductor’s use of improvisation throughout the choral year, moving beyond the confines of this study to provide an even more detailed picture of how improvisation may be incorporated into traditional choral settings.

Moreover, a qualitative approach to examining the phenomenon of improvisation in choral settings from students’ perspectives is an area ripe for research. Probing students about their sources of fear, motivation to participate in improvisational strategies, strategies that appeal to them, and challenges they encounter are several worthy avenues of pursuit, as the results from these types of studies would likely inform pedagogical approaches.
Lastly, while there are studies that have measured the degree to which pre-service teachers have received training in improvisation, studies measuring the pre-service teachers’ musicianship skills may also be worthy of consideration. Perhaps there is a correlation between the degree to which improvisation may be implemented and the strength of the individual educator’s musicianship skills, in addition to their pedagogical exposure to improvisation.

5.10 Conclusion

Just as with improvisation, predicting with accuracy what will happen in music education in the 21st century is a tenuous proposition. Madura’s (1999) prediction that “in all likelihood, the twenty-first century will be one that sees vocal improvisation as a vital musical activity in grades K-12” (p.1) does not seem to have taken hold, despite calls for its inclusion in music curriculums since the 1970s. In the chapter, “A 2020 Vision of Music Education,” Fiske (2000) reminds us, however, that “research has shown that it takes approximately 50 years for an innovative idea to permeate the entire…school system” (p. 275). A recent surge in articles relating to improvisation in music education settings suggests that improvisation is garnering increasing support.

Fiske (2000) also surmises that “what is discussed with university music education majors today may very well be represented by tomorrow’s school music curricula” (p. 276). Teacher education will play a role in determining the degree to which Madura’s prediction will come to light. Gordon’s views on this subject are compelling. In an interview (Pinzino, 1998), Gordon was asked, “If you could make only one recommendation to music teachers of the next century, what would it be?” His response follows:

My best recommendation to music teachers of the next century is to improvise, improvise, improvise! Get rid of the notation. Learn from music learning theory to teach children to make music without the aid of notation or music theory. Follow religiously the process of the way we learn language. That would be the most important thing they could do for themselves and for their children. (p.4)
Swanson and Campbell (2016) offer these views on the role of improvisation in relation to
teacher education. Echoing Hickey’s (2009) view that “True improvisation cannot be taught – it
is a disposition to be enabled and nurtured” (p. 286, italics in original), Swanson and Campbell
(2016) tell us that

We (adults) do not need to be taught to improvise; rather we need to be reminded. Just as
we are “born to groove,” we are born to improvise. What is needed is space in the tertiary
curriculum for students to develop their natural propensities: space to be playful and
explore; space to invent and express themselves without suffocating parameters; and
space to break rules in the process of discovering them. With a rekindling of these
childlike dispositions, there exists the potential for synergies in K-12 settings—replacing
the “I don’t know how to improvise” rhetoric with an acknowledgement of improvisation
as a primary vehicle for musically connecting with K-12 students. This is the key not
only to training responsive teachers with relevant pedagogical practices, but also to
cultivating musicians who are engaged, playful, thinking, and expressive. (pp. 209-210)

How choral educators will negotiate improvisation in choral settings, whose chief mode of study
involves music notation, remains a subject to be explored in greater detail. This study has shown,
however, that improvisation does not need to take the place of traditional rehearsal methods that
characterize many of today’s choral classrooms. On the contrary, improvisation enhances choral
settings and can counter limitations of the performance-based model of choral education that
have been elucidated by authors such as Snow and Apfelstadt (2002), Bartel (2004b), and Freer
(2011). Embracing improvisation might well usher in a new tradition and approach to choral
music education that values individual contributions, destabilizes power structures, enhances
choral cohesion, and invites transformative experiences for the student and teacher alike.
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Appendices
Appendix A: Informed Consent

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Study Name: Improvisation in Choral Settings

Researchers:

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Dr. Hilary Apfelstadt, Faculty Sponsor, 80 Queens Park, Toronto, ON M5S 2C5, Canada, 416-978-0827, hilary.apfelstadt@utoronto.ca

Introduction: My name is Frances Farrell. I am a third-year doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto studying with faculty supervisor Dr. Hilary Apfelstadt. You are being asked to participate in a research study entitled Improvisation in Choral Settings. The following form outlines the purpose of the research study, what you will be asked to do as a participant, should you agree to participate, participation options, and confidentiality issues. I have enclosed an extra copy of this form for your records.

Purpose of the Research: Improvisation is an important yet overlooked pedagogical tool in choral settings. Fear, lack of training, and lack of time are often cited as deterrents to using improvisation. Studying how choral educators use improvisation in choral settings would yield valuable insights into ways in which fear, lack of training, and time constraints may be mitigated. Three central questions will be used to examine the use of improvisation in choral settings: 1) Why use improvisation in choral settings? 2) How can improvisation be used in choral settings? 3) What, if any, are the challenges for teachers and students in using improvisation in choral settings? This study will serve as a resource for choral educators wishing to utilize improvisation with their students by providing models for teachers to study and emulate.

Participant Selection: You are being asked to participate in this study because of your expertise with improvisation in choral settings.

What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research: If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in two 60-75 minute semi-structured interviews. One will be on-site. The other interview will either be on-site or conducted via Skype. The interview questions will focus on rationales for and ways in which you utilize improvisation. I will send the interview questions to you ten days in advance so that you have time to think about your responses. I would also like to observe three rehearsals in which you utilize improvisation with your choral students. Rehearsals will be video recorded where permissible.

Risks and Discomforts: I do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You: This research will be beneficial to those choral educators wishing to utilize improvisation with their students. Participating in this study will also...
help to extend and clarify your ideas regarding your use of improvisation. You will also be offered a summary of the research results, should you wish to receive them.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or the nature of your relationship with the University of Toronto either now, or in the future.

**Withdrawal from the Study:** You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, the University of Toronto, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

**Confidentiality:** All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. Pseudonyms will be used to protect your identity and I will mask the geographical location of the collection of data by defining the site broadly. Data will be collected using handwritten notes, and video/audio digital devices. You will have an opportunity to review data to ensure your views are accurately reflected in the dissertation. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only research staff will have access to this information. The data will be stored for two years after the successful defense of the dissertation. After these two years the data will be destroyed. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

**Questions About the Research?** If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact Frances Farrell either by telephone at [redacted], or by e-mail at frances.farrell@mail.utoronto.ca. This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto’s Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

**Legal Rights and Signatures:**

I __________________________, consent to participate in *Improvisation in Choral Settings* conducted by Frances Farrell. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature</th>
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Participant
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Questionnaire

Institutions: ________________________________

Interviewee (Title and Name): ________________________________

Interviewer: ________________________________

Survey Section Used:

_____ A: Interview Background

_____ B: Musical Training

_____ C: Rationales for Improvisation

_____ D: Challenges for Students and Instructor

_____ E: Strategies/Activities

_____ F: Assessment

_____ G: Demographics (no specific questions)

Other Topics Discussed: ________________________________

_______________________________________________________

Documents Obtained: ________________________________

_______________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________

Post Interview Comments or Leads:

_______________________________________________________
Improvisation in Choral Settings

Introductory Protocol

To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio record our conversations today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the sound files which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreeing to participate.

I have planned this interview to last for approximately sixty to seventy-five minutes. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about improvisation in choral settings. My research project as a whole focuses on the improvement of teaching and learning activity, with particular interest in understanding how choral educators engage students with improvisation.

A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been …

_______ in your present position?

_______ at this institution?

Interesting background information on interviewee:

What is your highest degree? ___________________________________________

What is your field of study? ___________________________________________

B. Musical Training

1. Describe your experiences with improvisation in your formal and informal training to become a musician and music educator.

C. Rationales for Improvisation

1. Why does improvisation appeal to you as a choral educator?
2. What are the perceived benefits to your students for using improvisation in choral settings?

3. Patricia Shehan Campbell outlines three frameworks for improvisation in educational settings: 1) Improvising to learn music, whereby improvisation is used as a means to improve musicianship skills; 2) Learning to improvise music, whereby students gain a deeper understanding of musics that feature improvisation; and 3) Improvising music to learn whereby students glean insights about themselves and the world around them. Under which category would you classify your use of improvisation with your choral students?

4. To what extent do you feel improvisation is valued in choral settings?

D. Challenges for Students and Teachers

1. What challenges have students faced when you incorporate improvisation in choral settings?
   Probe: How are those challenges overcome?

2. What challenges have you faced as an educator when you incorporate improvisation in choral settings?

E. Strategies and Activities

1. Please describe the improvisational activities you use with your students.

2. What is the source of these activities?
   Probe: Are they self-generated, did you consult published resources, or perhaps you saw another educator use these activities?

3. How much instructional time do you allot to implement these activities in your rehearsals?

4. Are the activities self-contained or are they part of an ongoing sequence of activities?

F. Assessment

1. How do you measure success with improvisation?
   Probe: Is students’ engagement with improvisation formally measured, i.e., rubrics, as part of their grade?

G. Demographics

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations:
Appendix C: Questions for Second Interview with John

1. Please tell me about the demographics of your choir.

2. What was your performance schedule this past semester, and what does it look like for this semester?

3. What are three primary goals you are hoping to achieve with this ensemble?

4. How do you define improvisation?

5. In the rehearsals I’ve observed, you use and make mention of a descending five-note improvisation exercise. I’m unsure of the parameters of this exercise. Please describe this exercise.

6. In the opening of one rehearsal, you did an improvisatory exercise with the hymn “Amazing Grace” and then went into “Bright Morning Stars.” Was this intentional? If so, what connections were you trying to build?

7. You used the Kyrie exercise and an Amazing Grace exercise in your rehearsals. You had also been talking about singing in churches as part of the choir’s fundraising efforts. Did you use the Kyrie and Amazing Grace hymns in performance? Why or why not?

8. In a follow-up rehearsal, I noticed you used a triadic warm-up to lead into a Monteverdi piece. Was this intentional or happenstance? If this was intentional, can you give more detail about the intent behind this sequence?

9. For “The Storm is Passing Over,” how much guidance did you give the soloists in your chamber choir? Did you give them some solo ideas or were students left to their own devices? Did you try it several times until they developed something they felt comfortable with? Or was the performance completely spontaneous?

10. Aside from the introductory improvisation exercise where you asked students to improvise on a D major scale in the style of Hassler, did you play around with improvisation in the Hassler in subsequent rehearsals? If so, how?

11. In one rehearsal, I observed students creating melodies and harmonies based on a bass ostinato. Again, similar to the question above, how much guidance were students given in creating these musical thoughts? Did you give them some solo ideas or were students left to their own devices?

11a. In our first interview, you said of your students,” And they’re willing to try things… even some of the people you heard yesterday sang notes that were not within the chordal structure you know you heard that and that’s okay at this point.” What steps do you take to facilitate students’ understanding of singing notes within the chordal structure?
12. You mentioned in our first interview that you sometimes bring in a book of folksongs and use these as material for improvisation. Please describe the typical exercises you use with these folksongs.

13. You had mentioned that you would be using improvisation exercises at a 30-hour choir retreat that you and your students participated in in the fall. What role did these exercises play in this retreat? What were the goals of the retreat and to what extent did improvisation help to meet these goals?

14. I noticed that with the Women’s Chorus you tended to break things down more, i.e., the Whitacre exercise than you did with your chamber choir. Why is that?

15. Using a continuum of improvisation exercises in which one end is more structural and the other end employs exercises with less structural parameters, where would you categorize the exercises you use with your students? Depending on what the answer is, have you considered other types of exercises that require more or less structure? Why or why not?

16. In general, how much time do you allow for students' feedback about the improvisatory exercises you've just used with them?

17. Have you ever considered using more improvisation in your rehearsals as part of ongoing exploration of improvisation throughout the year? Why or why not?

18. If you had more rehearsal time and less performance demands, how might you further incorporate improvisation into your choral rehearsals?

19. Is improvisation something you encourage your conducting students to incorporate as part of their rehearsal plans? Why or why not? If so, how do you teach them to do this?

20. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three things you need to consider:

21. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three things to avoid
Appendix D: Questions for Second Interview with Beth

1. Please tell me about the demographics of your choir.

2. What was your performance schedule this past semester, and what does it look like for this semester?

3. What are three primary goals you are hoping to achieve with the chamber ensemble?

4. How do you define improvisation?

5. To what extent do the improvisation exercises relate to the repertoire studied?

6. To what extent do you relay connections between improvisation exercises and the repertoire to your students?

7. In our previous interview, I had asked you about whether or not the improvisational activities you use in rehearsal are self-contained or sequential. You responded by saying that sometimes the activities and ideas will come out of, “what I feel like they [i.e., the students] need.” Please elaborate on this statement.

7a. What kinds of skills are you hoping to reinforce when using these improvisation activities?

8. What is the rationale of starting with a sound meditation?

9. I observed exercises in free improvisation that involved large group and small group formations. What other types of improvisation exercises do you use in your rehearsals with the chamber choir?

10. You had mentioned that with your community choir, you often give choristers the option of opting out of an exercise. What strategies do you use with choristers who consistently opt out of these activities?

11. How would you describe your role in facilitating improvisation activities with choirs you work with?

12. In our previous interview, you mentioned that you have to resist the temptation to control the creations. How much guidance do you offer students? When, if ever, do you jump in to give students guidance?

13. Is improvisation something you encourage your conducting students to incorporate as part of their rehearsal plans?

14. In general, how much time do you allow for students' feedback about the improvisatory exercises you've just used with them?
15. If you had more rehearsal time and less performance demands, how might you further incorporate improvisation into your choral rehearsals?

16. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three things you need to consider:

17. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three things to avoid:
Appendix E: Questions for Second Interview with Sarah

1. Please tell me about the demographics of your choir classes.

2. Are your choral classes differentiated by choral experience or grade level? For example, if a student in grade 11 who has no choral experience wants to take choir, will he/she be registered for grade 11 choral class or grade 10 choral class?

3. How much experience would you say the students you work with have had with improvisation, prior to working with you?

4. What was your performance schedule this past semester, and what does it look like for this semester?

5. What are three primary goals you are hoping to achieve with these classes and with this combined ensemble?

6. How do you define improvisation?

7. I wanted to follow-up with you about some comments you made about rationales for using improvisation in choral settings. In our previous interview, your rationales for using improvisation in choral settings were:

   a. To give students opportunities to explore how pleasurable making vocal sound is
   b. To give singers a chance to explore their voices without getting bogged down in extraneous details such as notational elements and diction obstacles
   c. To give students a chance to explore the uniqueness of their own singing voices.
   d. To give students opportunities to develop confidence in their own vocal abilities, especially with those students who have had little experience with singing or for students who haven’t had consistent exposure to choral singing.

These rationales seem to be guided by your observations about singing and the age group you work with: “Like, I feel like kids get a message from society or from themselves or from whoever that singing isn’t for everybody; singing is for a chosen few. Improvisation is a way of expanding that circle of welcome for more people to come into the world of making vocal sound and for it to feel safe and like a pleasant and pleasurable activity.” Please elaborate more on these comments: In your opinion, what are these messages? How are they transmitted?

8. To what extent do you feel the improvisation exercises that you use with your students are effective in meeting the rationales for using improvisation that you outlined in our first interview?

9. To what extent do the improvisation exercises relate to the repertoire studied?

10. To what extent do you relay connections between improvisation exercises and the repertoire to your students?
11. What kinds of skills are you hoping to reinforce when using these improvisation activities?

12. I had the opportunity to observe two classroom settings in which you used improvisation activities. One is a large space with high ceiling used for musical and dance rehearsals. The other is a classroom with a gradated floor. To what extent, if any, does the size of the room affect the success of the improvisation activities with your groups?

12a. Similarly, the class size of one group is seemingly twice the size as the other group. To what extent, if any, does the size of the class affect the success of the improvisation activities you use and or the way you implement these activities?

13. How does your work with improvisation compare with students who are new to you versus students with whom you’ve used improvisation exercises before?

14. In general, how do you incorporate student feedback when working on improvisation exercises with your students?

15. How would you describe your role in facilitating improvisation activities with choirs with whom you work?

16. In one class I observed, you were using improvisation exercises with your students for the first time. After the explanation of the exercises, you gave students time to try out the activity on their own with minimal intervention. During another activity, I noticed two students were not on task. They were laughing. You registered this behaviour, but I noticed, however, that you did not intervene until a few minutes later. I didn’t get the sense that you were unaware of what was happening. It was also clear to me that you are very skilled at classroom management. In a traditional choral setting, I sensed that you would address this kind of behaviour immediately. Yet, I noticed that you did not intervene until a few minutes later. It seemed as though your decision as to when to intervene was deliberate. What are your thoughts on intervening during improvisation activities?

17. When or if a student opts out of improvisation activities, how do you or how would you address this?

18. In our previous interview, you referenced an improvisation activity that your teacher partner uses. Please describe this in further detail.

19. Aside from the improvisational activities that I’ve observed, what other types of improvisation activities have you used with your students?

20. If you had more rehearsal time and fewer performance demands, how might you further incorporate improvisation into your choral rehearsals?

21. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three guidelines:
22. Please complete the following: When working with students and improvisation, here are three things to avoid:
Appendix F: Record of Data Collection

Data Collection for John

<table>
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<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>August 24, 2015</td>
<td>First on-site observation of 1st rehearsal of Chorale</td>
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<td>August 25, 2015</td>
<td>First interview on-site</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 25, 2015</td>
<td>(Additional observation of Women’s Chorus)</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 26, 2015</td>
<td>Second on-site observation of Chorale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 5, 2015</td>
<td>Third observation of Chorale conducted via Skype</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 21, 2015</td>
<td>Second interview with John via phone</td>
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<td>May 9, 2016</td>
<td>Transcripts of both interviews sent to John for verification.</td>
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Data Collection for Beth

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<td>August 28, 2015</td>
<td>First on-site observation of Chorale rehearsal</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 28, 2015</td>
<td>First interview with Beth (on-site)</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 31, 2015</td>
<td>Second on-site observation of Chorale rehearsal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 21, 2015</td>
<td>Third observation of Chorale via skype (faulty recording)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 5, 2015</td>
<td>Fourth observation of Chorale via skype</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 20, 2016</td>
<td>Second interview via telephone</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 20, 2016</td>
<td>Transcripts of both interviews sent to Beth for verification.</td>
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## Data Collection for Sarah

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<th>Description</th>
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<td>September 28, 2015</td>
<td>Informal observation of Period 4 Choir</td>
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<td>September 28, 2015</td>
<td>First interview with Sarah (in person) conducted off-site</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 29, 2015</td>
<td>Informal observation of Period 6 Choir</td>
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<td>September 29, 2015</td>
<td>Informal observation of select jazz choir</td>
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<td>November 9, 2016</td>
<td>Receive video footage of Period 4 and Period 6 choirs</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 20, 2016</td>
<td>Second interview with Sarah via telephone</td>
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<td>March 22, 2016</td>
<td>Ethics review granted</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 5, 2016</td>
<td>Transcripts of both interviews sent to Sarah for verification.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 12, 2016</td>
<td>On-site observation of Period 6 Choir</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 12, 2016</td>
<td>Follow-up interview with Sarah on-site</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 13, 2016</td>
<td>On-site observation of Period 4 Choir</td>
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<td>June 13, 2016</td>
<td>Follow-up interview with Sarah on-site</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 7, 2016</td>
<td>Transcripts of follow-up interviews sent to Sarah</td>
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Appendix G: John's Improvisation Strategies

Alleluia

Using the G major scale, John asks students to improvise on the word *Alleluia*. He does not give a tempo, resulting in a sustained soundscape comprising these notes. The following is a transcription of his description of the exercise:

This is a G Major scale. Listen. (The accompanist plays a G major scale.) Those are the notes you are going to sing. We’re going to take the text *alleluia*, and you’re going to sing some sort of line that is within that scale. For example, (John sings through the G major scale and sings example one). Another person might just go (John sings example two). Another person might go (John sings example three) It doesn’t matter as long as you are within that G major scale. If you are a high voice, maybe sing higher. If you are a low voice, maybe sing lower. But, we are going to create our own composition right now. It’s called “Alleluia.” Ready? You don’t have to start on the tonic, but wherever you’d like.

![Example 1](image1.png)

![Example 2](image2.png)

![Example 3](image3.png)

Figure 1. Possible improvisations based on the G Major scale John modelled to his students.
Kyrie

Similar to the *Alleluia* exercise, John asks students to improvise on the words *Kyrie eleison*, using a minor scale. He does not give a tempo. Students are invited to sing at a tempo of their choosing. They are allowed to raise the seventh degree of the scale, should they choose to do so. The accompanist plays a G minor scale. The students begin to improvise, resulting in a sustained wash of sound (Observation, 2nd Chorale rehearsal).

Amazing Grace

Students sing on a drone using *doh* and *sol* while a soloist sings the melody with ornaments. In another verse, the chorus is asked to harmonize and ornament this hymn (Observation, 2nd Chorale rehearsal).

Descending Major Scale

Using a ¾ time signature, students sing a descending major scale on solfege. A pianist plays chords underneath suggested by the scale: I, I6, IV, I6, IV, V, V, I. Singers repeat this sequence while others are invited to improvise over this scale. Instead on calling on individuals, he may assign improvisation to one section of the choir while the rest of the choir sings the descending scale.

“Earth Song” – Ticheli

Enlisting a sight before sound approach, John asks students to improvise music using the words to Ticheli’s “Earth Song” such as *war* and *love* as catalysts for these creations, prior to exploring Ticheli’s score. John recalls:

> We sang Ticheli’s, “Earth Song” a while back and I hadn’t even handed it out - they didn’t know we were going to sing. I used the idea of the song as an improvisation exercise – so, I can’t remember exactly what I had them do, but we wrote down words
associated with their thoughts on the importance of the earth: Mother Nature,… what’s hurting the earth, and things like that. Anyway, we just kind of jotted down words, and then I had them do kind of an improvisation exercise with those words. And it was interesting that the sounds that they created were exactly the sounds that we needed to have for “Earth Song.” And, and they didn’t have the song yet. So, then I handed it out, and many of the same words that they had come with are in the song…I think it really helped start the song (1st Interview).

Eric Whitacre Exercise

Jon used this exercise on the first rehearsal of Chorale. Students are asked to sit or stand back to back. With their eyes closed, John invites students to sing a vowel of their choosing and a pitch of their choosing, crescendoing for four counts and descrescendoing for four counts. After this sequence, students should take a breath and sing a different vowel and a different pitch for another eight counts, crescendoing and descrescendoing for a total of eight counts. John tells the students that he will not conduct them. He asks the students to close their eyes and to listen for the fluctuations in dynamics. At some point, the group will cadence. Before the students begin he invites students to “feel the person vibrating behind you a well as listen to the sound that you’re making. Don’t just sing for yourselves; sing to add something to the overall” (John, 1st Rehearsal).

Eric Whitacre with a Variation

Students engage in the same sequence as above. John asks them to sing for their first iteration the name of their favourite colour, for their second iteration to sing the name of their favourite kind of ice cream, and with their last iteration, students are asked to sing and repeat the name of their favourite season for eight counts. John asks the students to pay attention to the vibrations of the person they are next to. “So much of singing is feeling, not necessarily physically, but sensing the people around you. You have to know what each other is thinking and feeling in order to make the sound come together” (John, Additional Rehearsal).
“Ihr Musici, frisch auf!”

In an effort to emulate dance-like phrasing needed to perform a renaissance piece about drinking, John recounts relaying the following scenario:

The thing in the Hassler that I had trouble getting was the carefree dance quality of it. You know, it really is a drinking song that you can’t take too seriously. It’s gotta have a playful quality to it. And, so what I did in rehearsing that piece, we sang a lot on staccato “d” … and then I would have them move around… I kind of joked with them. I said, “Grab a beverage.” And, of course, I made the joke, “—of soda, of course.” And you know, everybody knew what I was talking about (2nd Interview).

Continuing with the anecdote, John says he gave the students the following instructions: “Alright, everybody, grab your drink and stand next to somebody. I want you to sway and we’re going dance to this beat” (2nd Interview). After the students tried out this strategy, he said he told his students: “…we’re going to turn this into a jazz scat and I just want you to use neutral syllables”. He had wanted to “have them do that à la Swingle Singers” (2nd Interview).

Ostinato Riff

John asks a bass singer to sing an ostinato. The bass singer makes up a bass line. As John circulates the room, he invites other singers to improvise over the ostinato. Eventually, everyone joins in. In another rehearsal, John uses ostinato lines from the South African hymn *Freedom is Coming* as generative building blocks. He subsequently invites singers to harmonize and embellish vocal lines over these ostinati.
Sing in the Style of

Using a descending major scale, John invites students to improvise over these scale tones, singing in the style of various composers. He adds that this is one way to find out about what the students know about composers and or genres of music.

Soundscape

In anticipation of a piece that recreates rainfall, John moves around the circle of choristers, inviting students to imitate body percussion sounds he demonstrates as he passes by each student, creating an aural domino effect. He starts with rubbing his palms, then snapping his fingers and then slapping his lap in a continuous fashion. He reverses this sequence until there is silence. The improvisatory element of this exercise is teacher generated as John is creating aural effects in the moment of performance.

Watch the Conductor

Using the first five notes of the major scale, John gives students the choice to sing any one of these notes on each beat. This gives students the chance to choose their own note and their own sequence of notes. Students also have to respond to John’s gestures which he may use to indicate dynamics, articulation, or tempo.
Appendix H: Beth’s Improvisation Strategies

Circle Sound

Each member takes a turn singing something or making a noise of their choice. “Sing anything – anything that comes to mind. Don’t think about it too much before you sing. Just make a sound” (Observation, 1st Rehearsal). What follows is a series of musical sound bites. Some are perfunctory. Some students take longer to explore their operatic ranges. Many gravitate to fragments of a major scale, echoing melodic snippets of the previous singer, while others recall vocal patterns that are reminiscent of a 50s-pop tune. Save the occasional rounds of laughter, there is little commentary in between each person’s creation.

Duets

Beth arranges students in partners. They are asked to create a duet. The only parameter Beth gives to the students is “You can either respond to each other like you’re having a conversation, or you can create a duet in which you are singing at the same time” (1st Rehearsal). Beth gives the students a bit of time to decide on which option to choose. Then she demonstrates with another student as they improvise a duet together. To the listeners, she offers this advice: “A couple of things, as you are listening to each other duet, listen to them in a very intentional way…listen to the sound that they are making. You can respond if it’s funny. Feel free to laugh, but don’t distract from what’s happening” (1st Rehearsal).

Then, each pair took turns singing duets while the rest of the choristers looked on. As with the previous strategy some duets lasted longer than others. Some students chose to adapt a recitative style, while others sang on vocables. Invariably, many pairs of students ended up paraphrasing what had come before often utilizing a stepwise descending line as the basis for their creations. Some students drew on popular music idioms such as a bass line found in 50s pop, jazz, and beatboxing. Others used drones and body percussion to generate ideas. There is no commentary in between each person’s duet. Those who are not performing are looking and listening intently to others’ improvisations.
Gesture/Sound Exploration

“On my gesture, sing your most vibrant sound” Beth says (Observation, 2nd Rehearsal). She gives a down-beat gesture. The choir sings pitches of their choosing for a second or two. She repeats this sequence, asking them to sing their loudest sound followed by their softest sound, and then their most unusual sound.

Groups I

After students finish the Gesture/Sound strategy, students arrange themselves into groups of 4-6. They stand in a circle and are about to embark upon another improvisation strategy. Here is a transcription of Beth’s instructions to students who are about to embark upon a small group improvisation who have just finished the Gesture/Sound strategy.

So…within improvisation, utilize the things that we just did, your most vibrant, loudest sound or your softest sound, your most unusual sound. You don’t necessarily have to do all of the same thing at the same time. But, still feel that you’re creating an organic piece of music - an organic experience that has a beginning, a middle and a definite end within whatever you chose to do as a group. You don’t have to sing the whole time. You can wait patiently for your moment to add your input. Or you can sort of groove along with everything…As with all of these improvisation experiments and experiences, there is a little element of risk that is very exciting. But anything can happen and we just need to live in that with some space. (2nd Rehearsal)

Without any discussion or pre-planning, what immediately follows is a series of group improvisations, each of which lasts for approximately one minute. The first group improvises, using a vocal percussion ostinato as a referent. Other students join in with humming, and melismas. The group struggles at first to find a harmonic groove. Just before the second group improvises, Beth interjects: “Strive to be different than what you just heard” (Beth, 2nd Rehearsal). The second group begins in a decidedly different manner, opting for a staccato texture, lip trills and rolled r’s, a sustained high note, a repeated melody and sirens. Group three begins with a series of sustained tones sung in singers’ lower ranges. Together they explore crescendoes and decrescendos that orbit around atonal constellations. Group four begins with a
series of pitches on the syllable “ma.” Sirens emerge emanating mostly from the higher range to the lower range. One student perforates this texture with nasal phenomes while another student explores sibilants. The next group begins several sustained tones that are offset by a repeated staccato motif. A similar exploration happens with the next group. Singers utilize mostly sustained tones. There is some evidence that students within the group are building on fragments that group members have created.

Groups II

There is a large outer circle. A group of 6-8 singers volunteer to step inside the circle. This small group improvises. The outer circle is invited to improvise along with this group based on what they are hearing from the small group. Beth also invites students to tag into the inner circle. That is, a person from the outer circle can tag someone in the inner circle and they switch places. She gives a couple of instructions to the outer circle:

   We’re going to let the inner circle improvise for a little while before we join in. So, we’ll let things develop a little bit and then at some point as you hear things, imitate what’s happening and then we’ll feel all of that development together…just keep listening intently to what’s going on so we create the same energy of attention that we have when we’re all…together. (Beth, Rehearsal 4)

The inner group begins as one person initiates an idea using an ascending stepwise motive. Other students join in harmony, echoing the rhythms of the first singer. Gradually students in the outer circle join in with imitative melodic fragments as well as rhythmic gestures including snapping, stepping, and clapping.

Sound Meditation

Students are organized into groups of four to six. Beth plays a note on the piano. There is a long silence. Group one begins to improvise by playing with chant like melodies. Group two works with long sustained tones that border the lines between tonality and atonality. Another group
plays with semitones, hums, and crescendos. Group four waits in silence before beginning. As with group one, students gravitate towards stepwise melodies in a free time signature. Group five experiments with staccato articulations hovering around a $d, s, m$ motive. Eventually these ideas grow into sustained utterances. Group six relies on percussive sounds like $sh$ and $k$. This group also works with descending and ascending slides. Group seven uses drones and singers in this group explore the utmost ranges of their voices. At one point, there is a series of parallel thirds. Clacking sounds are the defining feature of group eight, which is followed by a series of short ascending pitches that reach students’ upper ranges. Each of the improvisations last for approximately one minute.
Appendix I: Sarah’s Improvisation Strategies

Beat Poet Blues

Here is a transcription of this exercise that Sarah described. She used an exercise found in Weir’s *Vocal Improvisation* (2001, p. 70) as the basis for Beat Poet Blues. After students have listened to Weir’s exercise, which is built on a 12-bar blues chord progression, she invites students to vary the rhythms of the phrases. This is an example of such a variation as demonstrated by Sarah:

![Beat Poet Blues](image)

Figure 2. *Beat Poet Blues*

Sarah also modelled a melodic version of Beat Poet Blues. After students became more comfortable with the lyrics and rhythms, Sarah invites students to vary the melody found below and gives the students some examples.

![Possible Examples for Melodic Beat Poet Blues](image)

Figure 3. *Melodic Beat Poet Blues*
Circle Singing – Rhythm Cells

Rhythmic Cells Example

Keep repeating these two measures throughout the duration of the strategy.

Doom choom doom doom doom choom

After the first two measures are repeated, another group joins in with this chant.

Chick-ee chick-ee pop

Chick-ee pop

After measures 3 and 4 are repeated, a third group joins in with this chant.

Tick-ee tick-ee

Tick-ee tick-ee

Figure 4. Transcription of Circle Singing – Rhythm Cells

Rhythmic/Melodic Cells Variation

Using rhythmic cells, students are grouped in pairs. One partner listens to the other partner improvise a rhythmic pattern and uses the last phrase as the beginning of his/her improvisation.

Two-Syllable Nonsense Conversations

Sarah describes an exercise where she asks students to get into pairs. She gives them two syllables to use and asks the students to have a conversation using only these syllables. The students exchange non-pitched syllabic phrases using their speaking voices. She uses this exercise to demonstrate people can convey meaning without using a specific spoken language.
Gestural Song Circle

Sarah sings a melody to one group of students, using a gesture with her arms that uses up and down motions. She sings a second, employs a gesture that explores the horizontal plane that is subsequently echoed by a second group of students. After singing another phrase, Sarah asks a third group of students them to emulate her conducting gesture that outlines circles. The phrases are not exactly in time with each other. Once students have played with these fragments and gestures, Sarah gives the lyrics “Music is for loving” to the first group, “Song fill my soul” to the next group, and “Music is for everyone” for the third group.

Transcription of Gestural Circle Song

![Transcription of Gestural Circle Song](image)

Figure 5. Transcription of Gestural Circle Song

Clapping Canons/Body Percussion Canons

Sarah claps a pattern in 4/4 time. As the students echo this pattern, she improvises another pattern, which students then emulate in the proceeding measure. The patterns become more complex and incorporate other parts of the body (i.e., shoulders, lap, feet). Once students have the gist of these exchanges, students are arranged into groups of six. One student in each group becomes a leader and he or she improvises rhythmic patterns that the rest of the group echoes while simultaneously absorbing a new pattern created by the leader.

Conducting Patterns

In groups of four or five, one student conducts a three-beat or four-beat pattern, selecting and varying the tempo and dynamics. The rest of the students respond to the conductor’s gestures by
chanting numbers that go up to three or four, depending on the time signature, at various tempi and dynamic levels as dictated by the conductor.

Pre-Teaching *Lammaa badaa yatathannaa* arr. Shireen Abu-Khader

Some students sing the opening ostinato to this piece. The rest of the students sing an ascending and descending minor scale using the 10/8 time signature. They also conduct this pattern using a 4/4 outline to reinforce this time signature. One group is asked to improvise using the notes of the harmonic minor scale while the other two groups continue to sing their assigned fragments. Sarah gives each group a chance to improvise using the harmonic minor scale as each group sings either the opening ostinato or a harmonic minor scale in ascending and descending order.
Appendix J: Online Resources on Improvisation

DagleyMedia. 2016, April 29. Improvisation in choral settings [Video file].

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qHxj-qB9eUc


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9dTVSEXRPw


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OmxImnXcyU&feature=youtu.be
Appendix K: Select Choral Repertoire Featuring Improvisation


Appendix L: Suggestions for Incorporating Improvisation with Selected Choral Repertoire

*Mille regrets*—Josquin de Prez

Editor: André Vierendeels (25/06/13).

(des Prez, 1549/2008)
Strategies/Ideas/Entry Points:

- Once notes are secure, arrange students into quartets and invite them to decorate their vocal lines by filling in intervals with passing notes.
- Invite students to imitate or modify decorations that they have heard their fellow choristers use into their own vocal lines.
- Using ornament patterns that would have been considered stylistically appropriate for the time, (see below) invite students to decorate vocal lines.
- As a performance idea, have the choir sing the piece as written. Then have individual quartets perform the piece as they improvise embellishments in their vocal lines.

Excerpts from A Pedagogical Approach to Renaissance Choral Music, (Hunt, 2006, pp. 67-68, 73)

Discussion Questions

- What was challenging about improvising embellishments?
- How did you decide which embellishments to use?
- How did you decide when to improvise an embellishment (i.e., Did you insert embellishments in every measure?)
- What insights about this experience can you relate to other choral experiences?
“Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen,” 2nd Movement, BWV 12 – J.S. Bach

Bach (1852/2012)

Suggested Strategies/Ideas/Entry Points

Prior to looking at the score, arrange students into groups of five. Assign each group either “Weinen” (weeping), “Klagen” (lamentation), “Sorgen” (worry), and “Zagen” (fear). Ask each group to improvise music using the meaning of their assigned words as an impetus. After each group performs their improvisations, invite students to comment on what they heard. How did the students’ musical ideas help to convey the meaning of the word? When students learn the notes to the first page of this piece, ask the students how the composer has conveyed the meaning of the text. How has the composer organized the words?

Alternately, prior to having the students look at the score, invite the pianist to play and repeat the first four measures of the continuo line. Ask students to improvise a melody based on this bassline using the first five notes of the f minor scale. As students become more comfortable, invite them to incorporate all of the notes of the f minor scale (melodic and harmonic). Ask
students to find a partner. The first person improvises a melody over four measures. The other partner improvises a melody over the ostinato incorporating an idea iterated by the first person.

“How Can I Keep from Singing?”–Robert Lowry

(Lowry, 1860/2012)

Rehearsal/Performance Suggestions/Entry Points

As a precursor to learning an arrangement of this popular hymn tune, such as those by Rollo Dillworth and Gwyneth Walker, students can take time to play with this melody in the following ways.
• Invite students to add harmonies to the melody of this well-known tune. As an extra challenge, ask choristers to sing this melody without the aid of a conductor.
• Stagger the entries so that the melody becomes a free-flowing canon.
• Consider singing this melody as a canon as a prelude to the arrangement.
• While the rest of the choir hums a drone on $d$ and $s$, one chorister can sing the melody and add embellishments.
• While the choir sings 4-part harmony, invite singers to create descants above the soprano line.
• As students become familiar with either arrangement by Rollo Dillworth or Gwyneth Walker, ask students to compare their improvised arrangements with the composers’ arrangements.