Some kinds of passion: the role of improvisation in organizational learning

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Abstract

According to the tradition of organizational literature, concepts such as rationality, planning and control play a leading role in the exploration of knowledge. On the contrary passion is a dimension scarcely taken into consideration, and we prefer to adopt terms like “motivation”, “proactive behaviour” and so on, attempting to convert passion into more measurable and “checkable” elements.

This article aims to contribute to the analysis of the role of passion in the creation of knowledge, focusing mainly on improvisation considered as specific form of “passionate knowledge” inside the organizations. After a short examination of how we can talk of passion as a form of knowledge divergent from the well-established instruments of thought of western tradition, we will dwell upon the improvisation as an instrument of learning, and on its characteristics both in musical and organizational contexts. Even though within the specific limits of comparison possible between two different contexts such as art and organization, the analysis of musical improvisation leads to an interesting exploration some crucial dimensions of organizational learning: the relation between planning and creation, learning as a process of sense-making, the development of expertise by means of performance, and the role of improvisation itself in defining the identity of organizational learners.

The discussion of these subjects will be based on the study of examples from a three-year period of ethnographic research (2002-05), concerning different organizational and professional contexts relating to trade, hospital and school.

Some kinds of passion

Some years ago the actor Michael Douglas, in Fatal Attraction, played the part of a manager at the height of success, whose night of passion with a stranger leads to the ruin of his professional and family life. Some years later in Disclosure Douglas must suffer the passionate avances of his boss, Demi Moore, with a similarly dreadful conclusion. These and others stories, offered by the film imagery on the subject of passion and organization, continue to confirm the danger of this pairing for our culture, and the unavoidability of catastrophic outcome when the two elements are not properly separated. So until today the subject of passion has had no room at all within organizational studies. Mainly because from Romanticism western culture made a close connection between the concept of passion and the symbology of death interpreted as purification. On the contrary the idea of organization rests on a vitalistic conception of consolidation and growth of business, marked by rational optimism.
which gives very little room for melancholy and spleen. According to this view, organization (rationality) and passion (sentiment) simply annul each other as basically incompatible and at the risk of perpetual collision. But we would make a mistake if we were to agree *tout court* on this dichotomy which separates organization from passion as different orders of discourse: within the organizing process there is a great deal of passion, but that can emerge only if we mean this term in a different way, less restrictive, less dramatic, less related to exclusively emotional references. From this point of view we commonly talk about the “passion of knowledge” or also about “putting passion” into our own work. But what kind of passion are we talking about? Xenophon mentions the term *patema* as “a condition of the soul, and not something that man can learn”, suggesting that passion has deep roots and not always possible to know. We cannot acquire passion, rather it is something emerging and also involving a kind of sometimes painful tension - an other meaning of the Greek *pascho* – but not necessarily destructive or in contrast with the constructive drive of organizing. In other words passion represents the “lack of impassivity” of knowledge which, as Maria Zambrano notes, finds its epiphany in the metaphor of the heart (Zambrano, 1977: 47).

Therefore the meaning of passion analyzed here does not refer to irrationality, the mere denial of the *logos* and the reasoning deriving from it. It is rather a way of interpreting knowledge including the *episteme*, cognitive abstraction, as one of possible ways of thinking, but surely not the only one. From this viewpoint *episteme* is valid only if immersed in the warm stream of passion, sharing the realization of thinking which remains sensitive to the polyhedral and plastic nature of the relationships between people and reality. Passion makes “wise” the abstractness of logical thinking underscoring its boundaries, underlining its incapacity to completely describe the concreteness of human experience: if all men are mortal, so of course is Socrates, but not everybody dies like Socrates, and the form of his death cannot be completely contained within the logic of syllogism. This ability in combining reasoning and passion, and linking the knowledge to the “earth reasons”, is the ground covered by *phronesis*, that is this typical kind of wisdom which does not rely only on the accumulation of concepts or the efficiency of algorithms, but knows in a practical and holistic way, showing itself to be able to look after the complexity of relationship (or “to promote an ecologic sustainable thinking” maybe as we would say today). At the same time *phronesis* emerges from a social and widespread knowledge, which prefers a horizontal and collective line of elaboration to the prevailingly vertical and individual one of *episteme*.

But if separated from passion, *episteme* becomes *techne*, that is the method of thinking where the means prevail over the aims. Instrumental rationality voluntarily closes its horizon, narrowing its own interests to “what works here and now”, and expelling the passion as an element interfering with the cold and impersonal lack of concern indispensable to knowledge. The needs of domination get the upper hand over understanding, and only the outcomes expressed in measurable scores are stressed.

Nevertheless in our tradition the “passion to know” identifies itself also with an other character, Ulysses, who refers to “lower”, metamorphic and ephemeral kind of knowing: the *metis*. The knowledge of Ulysses is opportunistic and concrete, linked to the context and chance. A *prêt-à-porter* knowledge which allows him - as Détienné e Vernant noted – to get by in a number of circumstances, but is not able to grow in a cumulative way and therefore to enable a change of its own status (Détienné, Vernant: 1974). Anyone who uses *metis*, knows how to get by, is a trickster who lives from day
to day. Here, rather than passion, there is maybe an interest in testing himself in a
temporary and limited way, and this limitation of horizons seems right to establish
some connection between metis and techne.

Involvement, exploration and search for identity

The four kinds of knowledge so far analyzed are often present at the same time within
organizations, obviously with different roles and functions. Episteme and techne are
identified by the organization as its own formal knowledge, as reliable institutional
strategies of production and use of knowledge on which the organization builds its
image, especially with reference to the outside. But phronesis and metis represent
informal knowledge, the fund of shared knowledge, skilled practices and tricks of the
trade indispensable to the organizational working, but basically in a condition of poor
acknowledgement and visibility, mainly facing the outside. Therefore it is very
significant that, unlike the terms linked to the formal knowledge still widely in use
(epistemology, technology…), we cannot find similar terms for phronesis and metis
and they have actually disappeared from contemporary language.

What kind of relationship does exist between passion, as previously outlined, and
these different kinds of knowledge? Undoubtedly there is very little room for passion
in techne, which represents a model of gelid and disembodied knowledge. Passion
plays a stronger role in balancing inclination respectively to abstraction and the
opportunism of episteme and metis. Probably the closer connection is with phronesis
and its ability to construct a knowledge sensitive and “from the bottom”, founded on a
continuous confrontation within the community of practices. Nevertheless passion
does not seem to match perfectly with any observed strategies of thinking, but plays a
different role, marked by some key elements:
- **involvement**: passion means to be involved, and in this way denies the
  scientific common sense that understanding works by separation and
distancing from the object known and the subjectivity of the learner. On the
contrary passion highlights that meaningful knowledge works by proximity,
according to an experience of partial identification with the other (exotopy)
and subjective reworking (reflexivity);
- **exploration**: passion includes an element of tension and dynamism, but not in
  a unilinear, dull and abstract way, rather like a inclination to “thinking in
network”, to take care of meaningful detail, to bring out negative capability as
an attitude of active sensitiveness, to use serendipity. Thus exploration
stimulated by passion leads to the development of knowledge as a form of
“careful imagination”;
- **search for identity**: passionate knowing is not based on an ideal of objective
knowledge or neutrality of the act of knowing, but rather involves the
knowing as a process of continuous construction, that shaping reality and
means an active redefinition of identity by the participants in this process.
Therefore knowledge of reality and construction of identity tend to overlap,
and knowing means making concrete choices in the ethical and personal
sphere, involves “taking one’s own risk”.

These characteristics of involvement, exploration and search for identity make
passion a very interesting field to study the relationship between learning and
organizations.
During the last few years the research on the organizational context has been shifting increasingly from structures to process, leading to a gradual decline of the traditional model based on pure cognition and promoting the development of situated action approach. From this perspective organizational learning is no longer interpreted in terms of an information procedure, but as a social and cultural process where action and knowledge are strictly interconnected. This assumption is the basis for the current approach of learning-in-organizing, which means the construction of knowledge as “a form of distributed social expertise” (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2004; Gherardi, Nicolini & Yanow, 2003: 205). Besides representing a perspective apt to analyze the material and cultural characteristics typical of the learning process, the concept of learning-in-organizing leads to develop a change theory enabling the description of different and changeable dimensions of knowledge, mainly referring to the continuous production of “temporary networks of meaning” which grow, consolidate and dissolve in organizational contexts.

Surely passion plays a key role in this shift from structure to process, from a static to dynamic vision of learning. The afore mentioned dimensions of involvement, exploration and search for identity actually found most of process of sense-making by which organizational actors measure themselves during the activities of every day. Therefore it is important to analyse the subject of improvisation and its role in organizational learning as “extreme expression” - but very frequent and widespread at the same time – of such dimensions. Here passion takes the form of production of meaning “in real time”, where risk and creativity face each other producing every time new and unexpected configurations. The analysis will be supported with some examples of “improvisation at work”, coming from observation and interviews realized during ethnographic researches carried out from 2002 to 2005 in:

a) a multinational corporation of convenience goods;
b) a business and economics faculty;
c) a toothpaste production factory;
d) a hospital cardio-coronary ward;
e) an emergency medical service (999).

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**Interview with L., 25 years old, training for a few weeks as assistant manager on a multinational corporation of convenience goods**

Sometimes actually they put me in little... danger... for example we go to a meeting with some customers... and by surprise they ask me to make the report of the project, it happened a couple of times... but now I know this and so they will catch me out no more! (laughing)... I remember when they ask me for the first time I too my notes in my hand... I was really relaxed there, they caught me completely unawares... but... if that experience had not happened I don’t think I would have acted like that... that is it was a tragic experience, I mean at the end of a meeting, by the way I’d only been working there for only two days, I was already putting away my notes, and they asked me to present our project to the customers, to talk briefly about it... I did it mainly by heart, but above all I improvised... There I understood the importance of being always on the lookout...
Beyond the rational instrumentality

During recent years organizational studies frequently have outlined the development of a new way to look at organizations and learning systems from a point of view able to understand their typical conditions of increasing variability and complexity. The present feeling is that not only these suggestions are scarcely accepted, but also in fact a kind of general “return to order” is imposing itself, by the reappearance of key words as accountability, standardization, procedure, routine in the fields both of production and learning. More than the putting forward of instrumental rationality, today we see the prevailing of rational instrumentality, which involves an increasing and catastrophic breaking between low investments and greater demands to developing more cleverness at planning and networking in facing the growing complexity of our contemporary society. The primary worth in this complex context is more and more the fund of knowledge and experiences of people, and specially their ability to improvise, that is to modify and renew their competences in a flexible way according to change of context.

From this viewpoint the traditional model, which describes organizational activity as planning founded on the pattern «project → decision → implementation», seems to be very inadequate to understand how organizations restructure themselves dealing with the random perturbations which cause instability and lead to the emergency of new structural and functional properties. On the contrary the perspective of action-net allows us to analyze how complex sequences of exchanges and interactions produce - often in a conflicting and contradictory way – “networks of action”, which create meaning and knowledge by means of bricolage developed by organizational actors trying to solve their everyday problems.

Furthermore we cannot forget that this shift of attention from planning to improvisation, from “arising from the top” to “emerging from the bottom” knowledge, does actually concern the dimension of power. So it is not odd if, among the different metaphors which in recent years have taken turns attempting to interpret contemporary organization, that of the symphony orchestra (with the manager as conductor) has been so successful. In our opinion improvisation is not simply the umpteenth metaphor of organization, rather an important component of the way by which people develop their competences and fulfil the tasks occurring during usual activities. However it should be remembered that there are different kinds of musical set, not only with a fixed hierarchy as in classical music, but also with a distributed leadership as in jazz groups, where the conductor is not an absolute demiurge and musicians have wide room to intervene and improvise (and, why not, have fun).

Therefore in this sense improvisation - likewise passion - is not an extraordinary event, but rather a recurring experience on the organizational learning of everyday. To understand the meaning of improvisation, it is useful to observe people who use it in a explicit and competent way, as the aim of their usual activity: from this viewpoint artists are real “professionals of improvisation”. As we know many painters, actors or dancers developed the role of improvisation in their own work in a original and very creative way – we refer for example to Kandinskij, Pollock, Grotowski, Martha Graham. Moreover improvisation certainly plays an important role also in many other activities, which contain a creative component, such as inventing a new dish or telling a story to a child (Weick, 1995: 187-192).

But certainly it is music, as art specifically related to the dimension of time, which offers the best evidence of expert improvising behaviour. Jazz music specially
represents a very interesting interpretive paradigm, where improvisation becomes the heart of an artistic planning oriented to the realization of performance. Of great interest on this subject are the pioneering studies of Howard Becker, who in the forties conducted some ethnographic inquiries about the jazz dance bands (Becker, 1963).
b) Interview with B., 24 years old, graduate in business and economics and recently engaged by an auditing company

*I have just learnt to do the job interviews... which is an art, an absurd art, really... I think there is no tips to give, that is you must do it a lot to acquire this typical calm when talking with people... I offered the impression of a very clever man, strongly determined on my future plans,... and at last I really could feel this sensation inside me! (smiling)... but I got it after a huge number of interviews, after making a lot of mistakes about the way of talking to people or looking undecided... [...] The recruitment agencies... you can tell them some rubbish, but if you do so in a determined way they believe you! But if you tell it undecided they catched [...] At that time I had interviews also in other companies, banks and so on... I was already employed at KPMG, so I didn’t care so much, but I was so able to present myself in a specific way so that the day after they called me for a job in two other companies... so, I think it was a skill in coping with interviews, an ability to talk with people without making them understand I was begging for a workplace... because many people during the interviews treat you in this way, they make you understand you must thank them because they are giving you this opportunity... but I think if you call me it means you need me, so it is a reciprocal matter...*

Improvisation and mistakes

“Im-provisation” literally means “to not foresee”, represents the opposite of rigidity of planning, of control by the past of the present and future. This condition of uncertainty is not only usual but also desired by jazzmen. On *Thinking in Jazz. The Infinite Art of Improvisation* Berliner notes that improvisation “involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation” (Berliner, 1994: 241). Jazzmen usually spread the opinion that improvisation is basically composing in real time, that is composing and creating from one moment to the next during the action of playing. By a research on the performance of some musicians, Duranti and Burrell identified three key dimensions of improvisation (Duranti & Burrell, 2004: 73):

- appropriation and transformation of previous musical texts;
- individual and collective search for the unexplored harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic possibilities of a song;
- aesthetic and moral quest, which includes the search of a “unique self” that should characterize each jazz musician.

From the specific perspective of jazzmen, improvisation is not a merely technical exercise, an abstract and impersonal play of notes. On the contrary, improvisation is a research that deeply involves the Self of jazzman, where his pragmatic, moral and emotional self-fulfilment is at stake. Duranti and Burrell talk about an implicit “moral perfectionism”, interpreted by musicians as an engagement to talk and act in a truthful way with themselves: improvisation relates to playing in a “honest and humble” way, to completely “be himself” and find in this way a real or possible identity through the performance; in a musical (but not only) meaning (Duranti & Burrell, 2004: 78-84).
Therefore the analysis of improvisation highlights some analogies with the outlined characteristics of passion, and especially regarding the involvement and search for identity where the professional and personal sphere tend to overlap and merge. However we must stress that improvising action does not occur in an empty space, but is always linked to a specific genre and context. Improvisation always operates within some mainstream, with reference to the acknowledged and accepted “way to do things”. Improvising we must consider not only the creativity of our own performance, but also the role of inevitable resistance to the change, and how the new balance that we propose between tradition and innovation can be accepted by other people. As Becker says, for jazzman the judgement of other colleagues on the quality of his music is more important than the opinion of the public. In a similar way the organization has an “audience” of specialists whose evaluation plays an essential role in supporting or refusing innovation. In fact the ability to go beyond the usual patterns using divergent thinking, both in improvisation and organizational learning, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of change. The context where change takes place must be able also to consider mistakes, which improvisation inevitably produces, not as irreversible failures but as learning resources useful to the development of practices. Therefore the situation where improvisation happens must contain a certain number of weak ties, which make it flexible enough to see the improvising action not as a simple break but as a further increase of possible choices. From this viewpoint improvisation takes the form of a specific way to create meaning, setting up new relationship between the elements of organization (Kamoche & Pina E Cunha, 2002: 97). It is a way based on a process of creative segmentation of information and events flow, whose meaning (as in every performance) we can get only in a retrospective way. This relates not only to the improvisation conceived as a concluded whole, but also to the improvising process during his concrete development, which requires the musician’s ability to make the right decisions in real time, relating to an ongoing context itself. Starting from ties and possibilities contained in a well-known melody, and from the performer’s experience (that is his/her ability to shape melody by practice and memory) improvisation produces new structures, basically marked by fluidity and generative capability (Figure 1).
c) Interview with R., 29 years old, head service engineer on a toothpaste production factory

Interviewer: Have you ever came across machinery breakdowns which have different solutions, I mean breakdowns that you have never seen before?

R.: Yes, yes I have...

I.: And what did you do?

R.: So, there... it is a personal interpretation of the operator. There is people who... they think in a certain way... and maybe they get it faster than other people who... use their own head too, but they try an other way and get it maybe a little bit later. But it is a personal interpretation...

I. Do you ever think up, so to speak to invent, the solution?

R.: Yes, yes well... some setting up... Invent? Who can actually say that? Yes, in my opinion the solutions we adopted, that I adopted and still adopt I think they are good...

I.: Is there something creative in this kind of work?

R.: Yes, yes, sure...

I.: You can't simply read the instructions and apply the solution...

R.: No, absolutely. You must apply yourself. On manufacture you must use your own head. Otherwise you can't reach the solution of the problem. And mainly the setting up, the little setting up of engines, to understand the breakdown, why it is working bad, to imagine the reason... If it is working this way, what can I do? No, from this point of view... you must apply yourself. Sometimes you must rack your brains too... and try intensely... yes there it is...

“Here and now”

Regarding the stories that musicians tell about their apprenticeship, learning to improvise is like mastering a new language, by a gradual approach to the domains of imagination and concentration of increasing complexity. Although some literature inclines to stress the romantic component of “genius and intemperance”, jazz improvisation relates to a strict discipline of listening, study and practice, at least as with intuition and spontaneity. Jazzmen aren’t born, but made, and the formula to produce a good improvisation is the same suggested by Einstein: “10% inspiration, 90% transpiration”. From this point of view we can identify four different levels that form the continuum of improvisation, starting from a simply alteration of accents and dynamics (interpretation), to a modification of rhythm of the phrases (grace-notes), to the introduction of new groups of notes into the melody (variation), and finally turning the tune into new structures, only partly similar to the original (improvisation) (Figure 2).

This shift, from regularity to transformation, does not happen in a linear way but suddenly, and highlights some analogies with organizational qualities of many complex systems, characterized by forms of stability also far from balance. Prigogine affirms that fluctuations and jumps typical of such structures not only do not damage organization, but on the contrary promote the creation of new and more complex dimensions of order (Prigogine, 1989: 396-400). From this point of view...
Improvisation particularly seems to share some essential principles of chaos theory. As in the chaotic systems, marked by an extreme sensitiveness to the initial conditions, improvisation also originally starts from little crucial forms which lead to big consequences: minimal changes on the initial condition of system eventually lead to outcomes on a large scale. Improvisation represents in this way a procedure to produce possibilities: choosing a specific cluster of elements, a certain fork, we promote some development lines and exclude others. Unlike the strategies of statistics, addressed to give a quantitative structure to the “background noise” of chance, improvisation works in a qualitative way, by complex feedbacks which create chaotic forms of organization, that is regular but non-linear.

Therefore the analysis of improvisation leads to understand from a different perspective the concept of change and its role in organizational contexts. From this viewpoint we can identify two models respectively based on stability and instability features (Table 1). Within the stability models we can find two patterns: the first one, more traditional, tends to interpret change as linear progression, gradual and incremental; the second one, referring to the punctuated equilibrium theory, means the change as process interfering in occasional way and promoting radical changes on organization, which however maintains wide periods of invariability. On the contrary, the third model assumes instability not as a possible event but as background perspective, and interprets change as permanent condition of organization, which must constantly react to sudden changes of work context.

Interpreting contemporary organizations from this perspective allows us to stress the increasing meaning of improvisation competence on organizational learning. From this viewpoint improvisation seems a basic and everyday component of organizational activity, as the ability to modulate the practices in a flexible way relating to unforeseen events. That is the role of expertise, understood as competence to interpret-modify-combine-improvise one’s own action to product answers “here and now”. Expertise begins just where planning (that is scheduled control) ends, and represents exactly the kind of answer we cannot find in a handbook (and even if it was there, seldom would we have time for find it).

The extensive possession of this knowledge essentially divides experts from novices: whereas novices are engaged to orient themselves on the rules of an unknown universe, experts have all basic knowledge which allows them to work at ease on the context. According to Hutchins, experts possess a wider “horizon of observation” than learners, because his competences overlap the partial skills of novice (Hutchins, 1996: 35-62). Nevertheless in our opinion the difference expert-novice is based not only on a quantitative principle (“to know more”), but also on a qualitative one (“to know when it is opportune”), that is the ability to perceive when breaking the well-established frame of rules becomes a favourable choice for organization. The expert does not imitate a model mechanically and rigidly, but creates his own personal style, having a variously extended range of choices and alternative behaviours, which he manages according to the different signals coming from organizational situation. Therefore the role of rules decreases, whereas the intuition relating to the context - “here and now” - becomes more important.
d) Observation by a nurse, G. (37 years), in a hospital cardio-coronary ward. S. is her trainee of two days, M. her colleague

The patient comes from intensive care. Her nurse says: “Today frequently had TV [Ventricular tachycardia], the last one an hour ago, and now he is going on with arrhythmias”.

We put the patient to bed and immediately a TDP begins [polymorphous ventricular tachycardia]. The defibrillator is already ready, all is connected. I have the defibrillator ready to discharge, I set the charge looking at the bed. S. is connecting the patient to the monitor and I don’t want to expose her to the risk of shock. I say: “Let go, go away!”. She looks confused but she is not touching the bed, so I discharge.

After two minutes TV again and defibrillation. Doctor tells us what kind of drugs to put into the infusion and I tell S. what she has to do (preparing a drip with potassium). I give her myself the potassium phials, a mistake with this electrolyte can be lethal and now we have no time for long explanations, we have to hurry up. I tell her always to read carefully the name on the phials, because potassium can be associated with other elements: never to trust an identification based on the colour of the label because supplies frequently change. She nods and read before using the phials.

As soon as we go back in the cubicle new TV and defibrillation, “I hope it will stop” I think.

The drugs in the infusion seems to work, the rhythm becomes stable, I and M. laugh nervously. S. asks: ‘Do you ever get upset?’ M. replies: “Yes, there is always a bit of agitation, exorcize it laughing”. Clearly S. didn’t notice that my hands shook a bit, after the first defibrillation: there is an adrenalin discharge in these moments that doesn’t disappear immediately... After a while S. asks me about the arrhythmias. “And if the TDP had not stopped?” I answer that we can use the defibrillator many times but if the patient doesn’t react, there is not much we can do. S. asks me also about IMA [acute myocardic infarct], what kind of therapy we do, what happens... I explain how different the initial symptoms of IMA can be and explain again what kind of therapy we usually do. I tell her the drugs employed are after all always the same and the CCW [cardio-coronary ward] was conceived to fight malignant arrhythmias, and to work in CCW means to be waiting for them... and if one can’t stand the situation is better to move elsewhere...

Jam session

By his training the budding jazzman not only develops a higher mastery of his means and a personal style, but is increasingly recognized as an effective member of the musical community. As we noted, the creative confrontation happens with reference to a genre, a tradition created and supported by a community of practitioners. This tradition is based not only on a list of tunes and interpretations, but also on the judgement of community, on the way it talks about musicians and values their performance. Ironically, a jazzman has to take his place in tradition, but the essential
assumption for that is to become an innovator, which involves breaking away from tradition. The concept of standard thus plays an essential role. With regards jazz music this term means melodies that all musicians know, and whose harmonic progression offers the basic grounds for improvisation. During the so-called jam session, musicians who have never played together can start immediately to improvise grounding on the knowledge of a common range of standards. So standard is a shared groundwork, a minimal structure where elements apparently essential from the outside – participation of the public, number of musicians or kinds of instruments played – are of minor interest comparing to the appreciation of other colleagues. But very frequently this minimal structure is even modified by some musician during the performance, so that the change of background “forces” other musicians to go off the beaten tracks and explore new paths.

Obviously this situation in not lacking in risks, and the fascination with jazz arises often from this ability of the musician to keep his balance dangerously on a tightrope, doing more and more difficult feats. At this level, as we can imagine, mistakes are not so infrequent, and one of most appreciated qualities in the jazz community is the ability of musicians to handle a mistake, transforming it in a “deliberate” component of performance. But it very rarely happens that improvisation does not limit itself within a more or less variable pattern, but goes so far as to break the consolidated frame and conflict with the traditional canons, wrong-footing also most of musicians themselves. In this way a second level change may take place, promoting the creation of a new genre and a new community of practices, different from that which remains linked to the tradition: so be-bop kept its distance from Dixieland, and free jazz from bop. Such change redraws and extends in a strong way the limits of that which we can call “improvisation area”, that is the expressive range between rigid predictability and complete unpredictability where the musician can move to create new configurations (Figure 3).

Therefore the improvisation area defines this room of rules and meanings which leads to construct functional forms of “immediate aggregation”. A jazz band can form in the afternoon to play in the evening and be dissolved immediately afterwards. Besides durable bands, which can be considered as real micro-communities of practices, jazz gives the opportunity to organize ephemeral and “in real time” groups. This kind of group works for local and temporary situations and leads to a “knot-working”, that is a provisional and scarcely planned configuration (Engeström, 2004: 153-155).
e) Record of a telephone call to an emergency medical service (999). D: doctor on the ambulance, O: online service operator.

1st call

1. \( \text{D: Listen [+] a serious patient coming from !Casate! a red one [top priority]! Unfortunately Mornago & refused her} & \)
2. \( \text{O: & Casate?} & \)
3. \( \text{D: yes, they refused her from & Casate and Mornago} & \)
4. \( \text{O: & where is Casate?} & \)
5. \( \text{D: it’s near Stello. They refused her from Casate and & from Mornago} & \)
6. \( \text{O: & and why?} & \)
7. \( \text{D: she’s ! a girl! a car accident [+] a concussion} \)
8. \( \text{O: mh} \)
9. \( \text{D: she’s having a cardiac arrest too. Recovered. She’s intubated. Hem, now the parameters are steady. Good pulse rate. I have no pressure, but the pulse is regular. Mmh [++] what do I think?=} \)
10. \( \text{O: = does the int/ intensive care know all of it?} \)
11. \( \text{D: the neuro-intensive knows. They told me there was no room but they are making an effort to clear something because unfortunately we have no other choices! CAT scan doesn’t / doesn’t work in Mornago so=} \)
12. \( \text{O: = again!?} \)
13. \( \text{D: yes. S} \)
14. \( \text{So we have no other choices} \)

2nd call

1. \( \text{O: thirty-one old yes. Maybe if she had arrived at Mornago, she would have been saved} \)
2. \( \text{D: oh no, there was absolutely nothing in Mornago} \)
3. \( \text{O: what nothing?} \)
4. \( \text{D: there is no CAT, there is nothing} \)
5. \( \text{O: well, excuse me, but before you made her stable and then you could decide to do the rest} \)
6. \( \text{D: excuse me, but there we couldn’t do any CAT, we couldn’t know what she had} \)
7. \( \text{O: mmh, right} \)
8. \( \text{D: okay} \)
9. \( \text{O: thank you} \)
10. \( \text{D: see you} \)
11. \( \text{O: bye} \)
Passion and risk

Starting from a conception of improvisation as an extreme form of passion for knowledge, we outlined some interesting characteristics shared by the process of learning in jazz and organizational contexts. By underlining the active role played by improvisation also in organizations we want to draw attention to the limits of some present literature, which assumes the change as a top-down driven process. At the same time we want to highlight how much destruction of knowledge happens when more and more widespread trends of downsizing and retrenchment end by supporting the conformism relating to the consolidated guidelines, instead of promoting more competence on innovation and improvisation. If improvisation involves taking some risks, so clinging to the traditional methods of management in the unstable context of contemporary production means favouring inadequate strategies, which are much more dangerous to the survival of organization.

But we must mention also some questions posed by the analysis of organizational learning in terms of improvisation, and some possible boundaries of this model. We observed that in jazz there are minimal structures (standards), which easily lead to create temporary and low-level but highly functional configurations:

- can we find in organizations similar structures, and in the affirmative, on which kind of koiné are they based?
- what kind of role does the common knowledge of a specialized language (such as music for jazzmen, marketing for managers or medical language for the hospital staff) play in improvisation?
- besides the specialized knowledge, what is the role played by the tales of special cases (which Orr (1996) defined “war stories”)?
- How can we evaluate a good or bad improvisation, and what is the role of the opinion of community members?

Relating to the limits of improvisation as an explanatory model, we must not undervalue the conservative attitude of many managers, which leads them to place order and stability elements before innovation and change. Moreover we must remember that improvisation cannot be always the centre of usual activity of managers and employees, unlike musicians and other artists who practice it everyday. However we would like to stress finally a central point of relationship between improvisation and development of contemporary organizational learning. As seen above, improvisation is a hidden but very widespread practice in organizational activity, which gives to organizations big benefits referring to the ability to deal with current emergencies and unforeseen events. Therefore, whereas generally not acknowledged, improvisation is extensively exploited as an expected but not recognized task.

But we observed that creativity can venture into the unknown only starting from a shared and safe base: where this is missed (“go and go by!”) improvisation becomes superficiality and mistakes are the norm. So people working in contemporary organizations must take an important decision about accepting or not improvisation as a basic and not an instrumental part of their way to construct knowledge. This involves chiefly not separating improvisation from passion for knowledge.
References

Humphreys, Michael, Brown Andrea D., Hatch, Mary Jo (2003), “Is Ethnography Jazz?”, Organization, 10 (1)
Figure 1

memory -> experience

practice -> fluidity

ties -> new configuration

standard -> retrospection

opportunities -> generativity

Figure 2

Level of transformation

simple -> interpretation

grace-notes

variation

improvisation -> complex
<table>
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Table 1

![Diagram](image)

Figure 3