

[IMAGE]

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## **Creativity and Cooperation**

By Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB

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Jazz has been called the purest expression of American democracy, an art form transcending race, class, and culture and celebrating individualism, independence, and compromise.

Jazz is open and free. And yet, jazz itself adheres to some pretty important rules. In some ways, people are playing within that, which is much like democracy. We're given freedom, but we know that freedom has to occur within certain bounds and constraints, not just of the law, but of other people's freedoms, and their desires to express it. So jazz becomes a mirror that way. I just can't play whatever I feel like. I have to listen to what you're saying. I have to listen to what the other person is saying, and work it all together. And that's democracy at its heart.

- Filmmaker Ken Burns ([www.pbs.org/jazz](http://www.pbs.org/jazz))

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Ten evenings of filmmaker Ken Burns's documentary on the history of jazz have impressed me in ways that spill over from the purely musical. Interwoven within the sound clips, biographies, and cultural history were themes on creativity and cooperation. I believe these themes are important to massage as we continue to explore, and struggle with how best to create an attitude and context for our own learning and practice. Using these themes from jazz as a lead-in, I'll give a brief overture to some observations on creativity and cooperation from drawing and systems thinking, leaving more thorough development for future columns.

One theme vividly expressed by the documentary was how much the ability to create and innovate depended on inner drive and on exposure to other innovators in short the creative context. When a situation became stagnant and overly formalized, the cutting edge of innovation moved on to a new source and venue. A second theme expressed throughout the series was the delicate balance between implementing individual agendas and being sensitive to the feedbacks and interactions with the total system of other musicians participating in a session. Wynton Marsalis most clearly gave voice to this balance:

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Jazz music objectifies America. It's an art form that can give us a painless way of understanding ourselves. The real power of Jazz and the innovation of Jazz is that a group of people can come together and create art improvised art and can negotiate their agendas with each other. And, that negotiation is the art.

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A final theme from jazz that I want to underscore is the respect and acknowledgement given to individual virtuosity, rather than to a common standard. Bandleader Duke Ellington orchestrated his compositions to showcase the particular skills of members of his band, rather than for generic trumpeters, saxophonists, and drummers. As massage therapists, we too will benefit from respecting and giving appreciation to each other's massage skills and approaches, even when they differ substantially from our own goals and practice. Being dismissive and coercive are sour notes.

Playing music requires mastery of individual phrases, which in turn requires mastery of individual notes and relations between them. Slowing down to perceive the details is not unique to music. Art instructor Betty Edwards (*Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*) observed that she could talk about drawing or she could draw, but that it was extremely difficult for her to do both at once. She hypothesized that a shift in processing mode was occurring. When she was talking, her mind was operating in a verbal-symbolic mode that largely ignored details. To draw successfully, she needed to shift away from symbols into a mode of perception that attended to the details of lines, shapes and shading. We make this same shift when moving from the concept of a muscle into feeling it take form beneath our fingers, as a client engages it ever so slightly.

Professional negotiators have made parallel observations. The inability to find consensus often stems from becoming stuck in symbolic positions, rather than from irreconcilable differences in actual needs. In debates about massage education, we play out this theme by arguing about the need for hours of education, what I call "round hour syndrome," rather than letting the required hours flow naturally from a determination of the need for specific educational content. When we discuss the need and timing for specific content, the discussion becomes much more concrete and much less postural and divisive.

Jazz improvisation depends on interaction. It is a dynamic process of listening, adding something new, and then listening for the response. At an intuitive level, jazz musicians become masters of systems thinking the acknowledgement of the myriad interconnections and feedbacks between individual components of a total

system. Given such feedbacks, you can never change just one thing. Like the musicians in a jam session, all other aspects of a system will respond to any change introduced. If you focus too much on any one area, it's always done at the expense of everything else. Getting the right balance is an art, not a given.

These relatively simple postulates of systems thinking have profound implications for massage education. Massage educators may assume that kinesthetic and interpersonal skills will always be the strengths of entering students. Rather than teaching towards the totality of what we want to produce, we are tempted to simply continue former practices with the application of an enhanced anatomy and physiology "Band-Aid." Not only is this extremely bad thinking from a systems approach, but, as massage attracts a wider range of students, it's often less and less true, even as a first approximation.

Education can act as a filter and an enhancement. Ultimately, our profession will evolve from the details of what we explicitly value and nurture. My hope is that our ears and hearts will be able to hear the value of the melody and the interlacing harmony within our diverse profession. May we remain flexible enough in our personal agendas to listen to each other, and to let those entering our art find their own expression of virtuosity within it.

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Click [here](#) for more information about Keith Eric Grant, PhD, NCTMB.



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