

ENGAGING LEARNERS



STEP 2: YES . . . AND FOR THE CLASSROOM

How Improvisation Helps Build Better Futures

Education impacts our entire lives and not just during our student years. How well we work together on joint enterprises, and the ease and effectiveness with which we interact with others both socially and professionally, these things are determined to a considerable degree before we finish high school. Creativity, problem solving, and self-regulation are three key skills that determine our success in a career or pursuit of advanced education. Fortunately for K-12 teachers, this skill development can exist simultaneously with literacy improvement and content knowledge acquisition one of the most effective ways to do this is through classroom exercises in improvisation.

What is improvisation?

One definition of improvisation (Improvisation, 2017) is “creating or performing something spontaneously or without preparation, or making something from whatever is available.” In addition, “The skills of improvisation can apply to many different faculties, across all artistic, scientific, physical, cognitive, academic, and non-academic disciplines.”

TWO KEY RULES OF IMPROVISATION The concept of “yes... and”

This is the idea of taking (accepting) what another person suggests and building on it. All ideas are valued and included in an improvisation activity. No idea is stupid or dumb. Because participants’ ideas are valued and embraced, participants feel affirmed and are more encouraged to take creative risks.

The etiquette of ensemble

The ensemble refers to a group of people who are working together toward a common goal. In improvisation, the job of ensemble members is to make each other look good.

The Education Connection

We do not typically think of education and literacy when we think of improv. Instead, we think of improv-derived sketch comedy, like we see on stage at The Second City, and comedy competitions like the TV show, *Whose Line is it Anyway?* Yet true improvisation doesn’t always have humor as an end goal.

It is an ideal pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning because it has both inherent **structure** and **flexibility**. Its structure stems from the rules of each game and the process of problem solving the players must apply to complete the task. Flexibility stems from simplicity; no props, scenery, costumes, lighting are required. The players create everything that is needed from their own imagination. This makes improvisation a useful tool for developing first-rate writers, readers, and thinkers.

As a teaching method, improv facilitates a student’s ability to unlock textual meaning. Teachers and researchers often comment that students confide that they can understand text when they act it out because using their whole physical, verbal, and mental being gives them more power to “figure it out.”

The skill set that students practice in traditional literacy development activities – prediction, sequencing, vocabulary building, inference, and reflection – are all used in improvisation exercises. The difference is that, in improv, students practice these skills in an **active and engaging** manner.

STEP
2

HOW

Part of the Engaging Learners 3 Step Plan

Help your students achieve two years of measured literacy skill growth in just one year!

Improvisation is effective in developing skills necessary for literacy development, including:

Self- efficacy

Self-confidence

Critical & creative problem solving

Idea generation

THE VALUE OF CREATIVE PLAY

Improvisation is play, and play is central to effective, lasting learning. The famous early childhood educator Maria Montessori argued that play is the work of the child. According to Montessori, children learn best when they are active. Therefore, they should have a variety of play experiences in the content areas of mathematics, language, and science as well as social relations with peers.

Play links sensory-motor, cognitive, and social emotional experiences and it is the optimal setting for brain development. The act of play develops the complex and integrated brain, so essential for learning, **during childhood, throughout adolescence, and into adulthood.**

In short: play forms the foundation for a fulfilling life. It is creative, just as art is creative. Yet people of all ages seem to have lost their connection to the arts, because in the 21st century, most of us consume far more art than we create. Improvisation is a way to educate or re-educate people in the skills of creativity, problem solving, communication and collaboration that art requires.

Sample Improvisation Activities

It is the nature of improvisation exercises that they make more sense when students do them rather than when teachers explain them. Therefore, instructions should be simple and clear; the goal is to engage students in the exercise as soon as possible.

It is important for teachers to resist the temptation to jump in and tell students how to “do it the right way.” To a large extent, the exercise itself teaches everyone in the classroom – students and teachers – how the exercise works. And the best way to create an environment for free exploration is to establish clear boundaries about acceptable or inappropriate behavior.

Four improvisation exercises are described below. Each one is easy to master and has great potential for classroom application. More detailed descriptions and loads of other activities are included in *The Second City Guide to Using Improv in the Classroom – Using Improvisation to Teach Skills and Boost Learning in the Content Areas* by Katherine S. McKnight and Mary Scruggs, 2008.

SPACE WALK

This basic, adaptable exercise offers opportunities to imagine, visualize, explore, and discover through kinesthetic learning. Skills are developed in focus, following directions, self-awareness, and self-confidence. The game is played as follows. Invite any number from ten students to the entire class into the playing area, as space will allow. Instruct students to walk through the space. While they are walking, keep talking to the students so that they become accustomed to keeping one part of their focus on listening to instructions while the rest of their focus is on the exercise. For example, instruct students to freeze and unfreeze, to walk as though the floor is covered with sticky goo, as though they were different ages, such as three, twenty-one, forty, eighty, or like someone who is happy, sad, angry, and so on, with eye contact or other non-tactile way of contacting each other as they pass.

GIVE AND TAKE

In this deceptively simple game, an ensemble works together to ensure that only one person moves at a time in the playing area. It is a powerful tool for team building and an excellent foundation exercise for any kind of group performance work. Skills are developed in listening, following directions, team building, self-awareness, and self-confidence. To play the game, invite eight to twelve students into the playing area. Review the boundaries of the playing area. Instruct students to walk freely about the playing area. Call out “Freeze” and “Unfreeze” until students get used to walking freely and then holding still. Call “Freeze” a final time. Then tell the students that you will unfreeze one student, who will then be free to walk around the group. After the student has walked in and around the group for a few moments, freeze that student, and then unfreeze another. Repeat the process until every student has experienced being the only person in the group who can move. After the final student is frozen again, tell the students they, rather than you the teacher, will now give each other the signal to move. They will do this without touching or speaking. Tell the students that only one person moves at a time, and one person must always be moving.

ZIP-ZAP-ZOP

In this fast-paced game of concentration, students pass energy and focus to each other. Skills are developed in listening, following directions, focus, and self-confidence. Start the game by inviting anywhere from six students up to the entire class to stand in a circle in the playing area. The first time the game is played, ask all the students to practice an energy clap, in which they sweep one hand across the other and end up pointing their whole hand toward another player. Done correctly, this brush-clap will make a clapping sound. Once they have mastered the energy clap, tell them to accompany each clap by saying “Zip” or “Zap” or “Zop”. Tell students that zip zap zop is a mutating ball of energy that will change every time it moves to another player, from zip to zap to zop and then back to zip again. To begin the game, one student claps at someone and says, “Zip.” The receiver claps at someone else and says “Zop” and so forth.

PEARLS ON A STRING

In this game, a group of students create a story one sentence at a time. Skills are developed in focus, listening, oral communication, self-confidence, critical and creative problem solving, and idea generation. The instructions for the game are first to invite eight to twelve students to form a back line. Tell students they are going to create an original story, one that has never been told before. Each student will contribute one sentence for this story. Ask a student to offer a beginning line for the story. Instruct that student to step forward and take the first position in the story line. Ask a student to give a final line for the story. Instruct that student to step forward and take the last position in the story line. Tell the remaining students that they can fill in a sentence any place on the line. They do not have to fall into the line one after another. Each time a student takes her place in the line, the story is retold from the very beginning. This helps the students track the story.

Improvisation can enhance classroom community, encouraging an atmosphere in which creative risk-taking is the norm rather than the exception and where all students are truly included.



Educational research: proof that improv works

In a recent *Journal of Arts in Education* article, Smith et al (2009) analyzed data generated from the classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student artifacts in the The Second City Educational Program (TSCEP). They built a picture of the participating teachers and students as they explored improvisation in their classrooms, with The Second City artists serving as their guides and mentors.

Specifically, four themes emerged in the initial data analysis:

1. The playfulness inherent in the art of improvisation engaged the students wholly in the activities, increasing the involvement even of youngsters who had been reluctant to participate in other classroom work.
2. This engagement strengthened classroom community, making possible the opportunity for students who had previously been marginalized and/or who had special learning needs to take on more positive roles in their classrooms.
3. Particular children’s increased engagement led to confidence with expression, which helped them to extend their authoring abilities in both spoken and written forms and to take on the identity of “author.”
4. Finally, for most of the teachers, participating in training workshops and collaborating with visiting artists in their classrooms helped to expand their repertoire of pedagogical strategies and began to broaden their definition of literacy. The improvisation work moved the teachers toward creation of classroom environments in which all the various modes of expression that their students brought to their schoolwork were valued.

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College and Career Readiness

Improvisation is vocally, physically, and personally demanding; it requires students to make numerous kinds of presentations. Students are consistently analyzing and thinking on their feet.

This is why improvisation belongs in a contemporary classroom. Through the work of improvisation in teaching and learning, the development of a student's critical thinking is symbiotic to imaginative and emotional growth as students creatively solve problems through improvisation activities. Students grow intellectually and emotionally as they speculate, reason, and predict while experiencing and participating in improvisation activities. Improvisation can increase student confidence and competence in problem solving through active and engaging exercises. Improvisation games develop literacy skills and content knowledge that are the foundation for college and career readiness, while building creativity, problem solving and collaboration, key skills for success in college and careers.

Many of the insights in this brochure come from work done with schools in the Chicago area and The Second City of Chicago, the improvisational comedy enterprise. (McKnight & Scruggs, 2008).

References:

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McKnight, Katherine S., & Scruggs, Mary. (2008) *The Second City Guide to Using Improv in the Classroom – Using Improvisation to Teach Skills and Boost Learning in the Content Areas*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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ENGAGING LEARNERS presenters are uniquely qualified to train K-12 teachers in the principles of **improv for the classroom** and help them identify **effective applications** in any **content area**. Teachers leave each session with **tools they can use** in their classrooms the very next day. Let us know if you're interested in a **1-day, stand-alone workshop** or if you'd like to include improvisation and active learning as part of your **3-step literacy development plan**.

“ Innovative. Creative. Enthusiastic. Supportive. ”

– Julie Mitchell

Curriculum and K-8 Instruction Coordinator

Engaging Learners, one classroom, one school, one district at a time!



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