



YES... AND

FOR THE CLASSROOM:

BUILDING GROWTH MINDSET, SKILLS AND CREATIVITY

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HOW IMPROVISATION IN THE CLASSROOM 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.

For those who did not have the benefit of improvisation activities in school, all is not lost – in fact, far from it. Many of the techniques in successful improvisation apply as well in professional contexts as in earlier education. Good improvisation exercises also offer two additional advantages. First, people (children and adults) like doing them. Second, they require little or no financial outlay, even if best results are obtained by at least starting with a competent improvisation facilitator or trainer.

Schools provide excellent opportunities to see simple improvisation exercises in operation, and the results they produce. Children are often both spontaneous and direct in their actions and their feedback. Improvisation can be seen to be profoundly effective in developing several skills and resources for them. These include self-efficacy, self-confidence, critical and creative problem solving, and idea generation



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.”

Improvisation is also an ideal pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning because it has both inherent structure and flexibility.

The inherent structure stems from the rules of each game and the process of problem solving that players must apply to achieve a satisfying experience in playing the game. Flexibility stems from simplicity; no props, scenery, costumes, lighting are required. The players create everything that is needed from their own imagination. It is this paradoxical nature that makes improvisation a useful tool for developing excellent writers, actors, and thinkers.

A key rule is to use 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. All ideas are accepted and built on. Because participants’ ideas are valued and embraced,

participants feel affirmed and are more encouraged to take creative risks in this environment. A further rule is the etiquette of ensemble, referring 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.

CONNECTIONS TO EDUCATION

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

Laughter, jokes, and comedy are what usually come to mind when The Second City of Chicago is mentioned. We do not necessarily think of education and literacy learning when we talk about this famous institution whose alumni include the Belushi brothers, Tina Fey, and Bonnie Hunt.

As The Second City grew in its reputation, many young actors landed at the doorstep, hoping to learn improvisation from the greats. Soon, the theater offered classes in improvisation and comedy sketch writing for adults. The directors of The Second City also realized early on that school-aged children need opportunities to engage in creative processes too, and that those opportunities may not always come through the work routinely offered in classrooms, particularly in financially stressed urban centers.

Improvisation trainers from The Second City working with schoolteachers have already brought improvisation and its benefits to classes in several such schools in the outreach program called The Second City Educational Program (TSCEP). Funded by the Kraft foundation, artists in residence from The Second City Training Center provide educators in grant participating Chicago public schools with training, curriculum development, and performance programs in improvisation.

HOW IMPROVISATION PREPARES STUDENTS FOR COLLEGE AND CAREERS

Improvisation is play, and play is central to effective, lasting learning. The famous early childhood educator Maria Montessori argued that play was work. 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. Play is the optimal setting for brain development. Play fully develops the complex and integrated brain, so essential for learning throughout childhood and adulthood. In short, play forms the foundation for a fulfilling life.

Players engage intuitive energy through improvisation and develop problem-solving skills. Play is creative, just as art is creative. Yet people of all ages have lost their connection to the arts, because most consume far more art than they create. A century ago, people had more opportunities to sing together than listen to professional musicians, more opportunities to tell stories than watch them, more opportunities to create something visually pleasing such as a quilt or a woodcarving than purchase one. In this digitized age, we buy our music, we buy our stories, we buy our images. We have fewer occasions for simple artistic expression and therefore fewer experiences of the authentic communication that comes from participation in the arts. Improvisation is a way to educate or re-educate people in the skills of creativity, problem solving and collaboration.

Business sees value in learning and practicing improvisation too. Jesse Scinto writing for the Forbes Leadership Forum (*Why Improv Training Is Great Business Training*, 2014) notes that “Since improv training centers began popping up in the 1990s, businesses have increasingly turned to them for help with team building and communication. It’s not uncommon for improv troupes to descend on corporate off-sites or for bosses to recommend improv to reticent employees.”

The Power of “yes . . . and . . .”

The “yes, and” principle can be the antidote to workplace negativity, improving communication by reducing barriers and increasing acceptance.

Robert Kulhan, CEO of Business Improvisations, confirms the importance of this principle. In a CNN article by Mark Tutton (*Why using improvisation to teach business skills is no joke*, 2010), Kulhan says the “suspension of judgment” is essential for

brainstorming and creative thinking, although unconditional acceptance doesn't always come easily to high-flying execs. “It's not that critical thinking isn't important -- just that it can sometimes get in the way”. He also finds that as well as teaching people to react and adapt, improvisation can teach creativity, innovation, communication, teamwork and leadership.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN IMPROVISATION AND LITERACY SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Improvisation also promotes literacy skill development in all kinds of students, because it encourages creation, analysis, and interpretation of text. In the case of The Second City and the Chicago area schools, the students developed an original text and a secondary world that allowed them ample opportunity to practice and develop the literacy skills of speaking, listening, comprehension, visualization, representation, sequencing, synthesis of information, elaboration, understanding of literary genre, and elements of story.

Improv builds literacy skills

Methods such as improvisation facilitate a student’s ability to unlock textual meaning. Teachers and researchers often comment that students who participate in dramatic activities such as improvisation confide that they can understand text when they act it out because they can then figure it out. The skill sets that a student applies in literacy, prediction, sequencing, vocabulary building, inferencing, and reflection are all used in improvisation exercises. A key difference is that in improvisation a student is practicing these skills in an active and engaging manner.

In professional settings, participants have commented on the way improvisation activities reinforce the ability not just to hear, but also to listen to the right depth. As a participant interviewed

in the Forbes Leadership article puts it, “What you need to do in improv is listen closely to every word a scene partner is saying. Everything is moving so fast, you may have missed the most interesting thing. The audience may have heard it, and if you missed it you haven’t really driven the scene forward, you don’t know what to react to.” This is useful training for getting the most from meetings, especially those involving clients. “When you’re in a meeting with a client, you need to not only hear but deeply listen to everything.”

SAMPLE IMPROVISATION GAMES

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. To a large extent, the exercise itself teaches everyone in the classroom — students and teachers — how the exercise works. The challenge, of course, is trusting this process. For many teachers the temptation to jump in and tell the students how to do it the right way is often overwhelming. It is very important for adults in the classroom to resist this. On the other hand, while it may seem like a bit of a paradox, the best way to create an environment for free exploration is to establish clear boundaries about acceptable or inappropriate behavior.

We have selected four improvisation games for use in schools as examples here: Space Walk, Give and Take, Zip-Zap-Zop, and Pearls in a String. Each game is briefly described below. Fuller descriptions are available in *The Second City Guide to Using Improv in the Classroom – Using Improvisation to Teach Skills and Boost Learning in the Content Areas*.

Getting Started

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 IN 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.

RECENT RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Proof 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. Initial data analysis suggested that the strategies that The Second City artists-in-residence used with teachers and their students contributed to individual students’ self-efficacy and strengthened classroom community, making possible the opportunity for students who had previously been marginalized to take on more positive roles in their classrooms and creating inclusive spaces for children with special needs. The young people’s increased engagement led to confidence with expression, helping them to extend their authoring abilities in both spoken and written forms and to take on the identity of “author.”

Specifically, four themes emerged in the initial data analysis. First, 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.

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.

CONCLUSION

The democratization of the classroom that the underlying principles of improvisation support can enhance classroom community, making possible an atmosphere in which creative risk-taking is the norm rather than the exception and where all students are truly included.

The current model for teaching and learning promotes the idea and notion that classrooms should be interactive, where learning activities are a result of the partnership between the teacher and the students. Students have a voice in their learning and are encouraged to be active participants in the classroom. Unlike the traditional classroom, where the teacher primarily directs activities, the contemporary classroom results from the active collaboration inspired by a common quest for learning. The contemporary classroom encourages active teaching and learning, which are powerful in student development and achievement because responsibility placed on the students is greater than in a more traditional teaching paradigm.

Preparing all students for college and career.

An active approach such as improvisation is rooted in cooperation with peers as they make sense of a situation and present it to the rest of the class. 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. Improvisation is a source of deepening self-awareness in students as they find ways to express their ideas, opinions, and feelings through the physical action of improvisation. 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.

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Dr. McKnight is an author, educator and consultant. Her career in education began as a high school English teacher in the Chicago Public School system more than 25 years ago. She received her B.A. degree from George Washington University, her M.Ed. from Northeastern Illinois University, and her Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Chicago. She currently serves as a Distinguished Professor of Research at National Louis University. She travels worldwide as a professional development consultant and a sought after speaker in the fields of adolescent literacy, inclusive classrooms, Common Core State Standards, Interdisciplinary literacy, and integrating technology in the 21st century classroom. She is passionate about creating curricula that engage all students in the regular education classroom. And she is completely committed to the development, sharing, and promotion of ideas and strategies that develop literacy skills in all students so that they can grow to be active, creative adults.



Dr. McKnight regularly publishes in professional journals and is the author of many books including *Common Core Literacy for ELA, History/Social Studies, and the Humanities: Strategies to Deepen Content Knowledge, Grades 6-12*, *The Elementary Teacher's Big Book of Graphic Organizers, Grades K-5*, and *The Teacher's Big Book of Graphic Organizers, Grades 5-12* (recipient of the 2013 Teachers' Choice Award). She co-authored *The Second City Guide to Improv in the Classroom*, *The English Teacher's Survival Guide*, *Methods of Teaching English in the Middle and Secondary Schools*, among others.