

Supercharge Your Classroom with Improvisation

Improvisation is acceptance,
in a single breath,
of both transience and eternity

We know what *might* happen
in the next day or minute,
but we cannot know what *will* happen.

To the extent that we feel sure of what will happen,
we lock in the future and insulate ourselves against
those essential surprises.

Surrender means cultivating a comfortable attitude
toward not-knowing,
being nurtured by the mystery of moments
that are dependably surprising, ever fresh. . .

EVERY MOMENT OF LIFE HAPPENS ONLY ONCE
IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE.

Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts
by Stephen Nachmanovitch



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“We must remember how children learn, rather than how we teach. They learn through movement, emotions, activities and projects.”

– Albert Cullom in the film – *Touch of Greatness*

Dear Educator,

This workshop is designed to introduce you to Five Great Ideas from Improvisational Theatre that will help you be more creative in your classrooms, engage your students, and lead to increased student achievement.

To successfully implement improvisational arts into your classroom you will:

- ☺ Create a Space – where learning takes place
- ☺ Take a Risk – encouraging spontaneous expression
- ☺ Use “Yes-And” – demonstrating the benefits of cooperative effort and support
- ☺ Explore & Heighten – leading to discoveries in-the-moment
- ☺ Use Your Imagination – to experience the joy of engaging your students in new ways

Eric Jensen in *Arts with the Brain in Mind* states that, “brain research has increasingly shown that the bodily-kinesthetic arts contribute to the development and enhancement of critical neurobiological systems including cognition, emotions, immune, circulatory, and perceptual-motor.” He goes on to suggest, “Kinesthetic arts deserve a strong, daily place in the curriculum of every K-12 student.”

There are many improvisational structures that are useful for encouraging students to demonstrate knowledge in content areas in new and creative ways. You can integrate the exercises into everyday activities, or use them for special projects when and where they’re applicable.

Your responsibility is to be a catalyst that inspires students to risk, and to introduce structures and experiences so students can make their own learning discoveries. Keith Johnstone, in his book *Impro*, introduces all new classes by taking blame for any failures that may occur in the improvisational work, and stating:

I ask students to see themselves in such a way that they’ll learn as quickly as possible. I’m teaching spontaneity, and therefore I tell them that they mustn’t try to control the future, or to ‘win’, and that they’re to have an empty head and just watch. When it’s their turn to take part, they’re to come out and just do what they’re asked to, and see what happens. It’s this decision not to try and control the future that allows the students to be spontaneous.

It is a misconception that people get up to improvise and “something just happens” without any structure or guidelines. There are structures in improvisation, and also basic rules for successful improvisations. Spontaneous, creative communication is the goal, and your job as teachers is to encourage the natural expression of each student’s imagination.

Children are natural improvisers. With flexibility and patience, you as educators can provide an atmosphere in your learning environments where magical moments will take place.

Happy Improvising!

Create a Space

“You need to create an optimal environment with the right conditions for learning.”

- *Renate N. Caine, Professor of Education, California State University, San Bernardino*

You set the stage for your students’ learning – you are the producer, the director, the set designer and stage manager of your classroom. Everyday you determine what kind of atmosphere your students will walk into, and how they will act and carry out their roles as learners. You may not be able to create skylights and change the physical environment of your classroom, but you can provide the “mental windows” for students to let their imaginations explore subject matter. You create a safe space by fostering an atmosphere of trust, both externally and internally.

Take a Risk

“I believe that one of life’s greatest risks is never daring to risk.” - *Oprah Winfrey*

Model risk-taking for your students, and dare to bring in different ways to engage your students. Improvisational structures can help you gain and sustain students’ attention, expand their creativity, self confidence, and help them develop their emotional and social intelligences.

You don’t need to be an expert improviser, but you will need to take a risk, get out of your comfort zone, and try some of the improvisational structures you’ll be introduced to today, or better yet, make up some of your own!

Yes-And

When you “listen” with all your senses to each student, support them in their learning references, and encourage them to express themselves in whichever ways best reflect them, you are sending a message of acceptance and encouragement.

We all know people who think and express themselves with the words “Yes-But.” Improvisers know that those words block interaction, and stifle imaginative responses.

“Yes-And,” on the contrary, invites creative responses that help you build a classroom of trust and acceptance, while bridging conflict at the same time. When you think “Yes-And,” you are actively engaging students with the message, “I hear what you’re saying (or asking), AND here’s an idea that might help you understand more clearly, or express what you’ve learned in a new and creative way.”

Explore & Heighten

“The professionals rated “most creative” by their colleagues have the characteristic of having “a greater facility for play.”

- *Donald W. MacKinnon, Researcher, University of California Berkeley*

Explore & Heighten is an actor’s terms for “raising the stakes” by plumbing the depths of a character’s actions and creative choices, in both scripted and improvisational work.

Howard Gardner’s model of Multiple Intelligences offers a way for you to help students play to their strengths. Through improvisation, students can express bodily-

kinesthetically, musically, and interpersonally the ideas and knowledge they may have difficulty delivering in more traditional formats.

When you encourage students to demonstrate their mastery of material through different modes of expression, you are naturally leading a process of exploring and heightening.

Use your Imagination

“If you cannot conveniently tumble out of a balloon, or be swallowed up in an earthquake, or get stuck fast in a chimney, you will have to be contented with simply imagining some similar misadventure.” - *Edgar Allen Poe*

Howard Gardner, Hobbs Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education, suggests that in these “result oriented” times, the United States educational system needs to cultivate five kinds of minds: Disciplined, Synthesizing, Creative, Respectful, and Ethical Minds.

Wavelength regards the process of improvisational theatre as a stimulus that can address each of these minds. We invite you to use your imaginations and get started with having improvisation and dramatic arts become an essential tool in your lesson plans, curriculum, and assessment.

Resources

For further reading & improv ideas, check out:

[Improv Wisdom, Don't Prepare, Just Show Up](#) by Patricia Ryan Madson

[Arts with the Brain in Mind](#) by Eric Jensen

[Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts](#) by Stephen Nachmanovitch

[Improvisation for the Theatre](#) by Viola Spolin

Give & Take

Start by asking the students to walk around in silence, looking into each other's eyes. There may be some giggles at first, but give them time to warm up to this game. You model walking around with them, explaining that when you clap your hands you want everyone to freeze and then you will be the only one who gets to continue walking and talking. They can, however, take the floor from you by simply clapping their hands and then they get to move and talk while everyone else is silent and frozen. The object of the game is to take and initiate boldly, and to give graciously.

Variations: The first time you play it, emphasize that the students are free to discuss whatever they feel like, and that they don't have to follow what the student in front of them said, although they may.

Pick a theme you're studying in class, and get the students up to review before a quiz, by saying facts they remember about the topic. You are able to interject corrections if necessary, by simply clapping as well.

Instead of clapping, let students use their imaginations in innovative ways to "take" the floor: i.e. whistling, singing, snapping their fingers, whispering, etc.

Machine

One student starts a simple action that can be repeated for several minutes, accompanied by a simple vocal sound. Another student approaches and adds a movement and sound to the first student's. Emphasize that each new movement must build upon a movement of another student. They are to make connections with each other, without actually touching one another. This add-on continues until you have five or six students "creating a machine." Then one student explains how the machine works, following the logical, sequential cause and effect results. Encourage students to use different levels and planes, and to be in relationship with others.

Variations: Pick a topic, such as photosynthesis, and then have students demonstrate by sound and movement the process whereby photosynthesis takes place. The final student will provide the overall description.

Freeze Tag

Six to eight students form a semi-circle around the playing area. Two students step forward and begin a scene based on a physical activity. The activity can be suggested by the rest of the class, by the teacher, or agreed upon by the beginning players. Once they've established the action, any one of the standby players may call, "FREEZE!" The active players instantly freeze their physical position. The player who called "FREEZE" taps *one* of the frozen players. That player moves out of the tableau and the player entering takes their *exact physical position*. An entirely new scene begins with the entering player immediately starting a new *activity* suggested by the assumed position. (E.g., if one of the players is on all fours "scrubbing a floor," the entering player may turn this position into "searching for a lost contact lens.") As facilitator, the pitfall to watch out for is scenes that go on too long before someone yells "FREEZE!" Encourage the students to take a chance that their bodies will inform them of a new activity and scene direction.

One Word Story

Eight students are seated or standing in a circle. Each student will contribute only one word at a time in a group effort to tell a story. This is an exercise in spontaneity and a steady rhythm is to be maintained. For the first time, you may begin the story with the words “once upon a time...” Emphasize that it’s important to have the words make sense, to listen and speak loudly, to maintain eye contact, and that it’s the *group* that is creating the story.

Emotional Symphony

You will assign four players, plus a director. Two players are seated, two are standing. The director elicits four different emotions that students in the audience may be feeling. The director explains, “We are going to create a symphony. But as you can see, the players did not bring any instruments. That’s because this is an Emotional Symphony, and what we need from you, the audience, is a number of emotions.” Players pick emotions. Director continues, “We are now going to perform a symphony for you, and it will be in two movements. In the first movement we will hear the sounds of the emotions, and in the second part we shall use the English language. Now, let’s find out what emotions we will be hearing.” The four players say their emotions, and the director commences with a warm-up, asking players, “Will you warm up your instruments please?” This is to sound as much like a symphony as possible, and will be dependent on the players following the director (for example, if he/she gives directions to swell up in sound, go low, points to individuals, etc.) In the second part the players speak. They are to talk about the situations that would make them feel what their assigned emotions are. When the second movement is completed, the director turns and takes a bow, and the improvisation is over.

Connections

This is a sociometric exercise that shows you how your students are connected with one another. Get students up and ask each one to put their hands on the shoulder of the person they’ve known the longest. Eventually everyone will have his or her hands on someone’s shoulder. This will provide a bodily-kinesthetic image of how well we are all connected. It will also show you any participant who is isolated, or may need some special attention.

Making Reports – Speaker’s Bureau

Get four students in front of the classroom. One of them will act as the Moderator or Presenter of the panel. You can decide beforehand which topic you want them to act as “experts” on—something they’ve been studying in class, or a topic they need to review before a test—or you can improvise with having the class give suggestions on topics they want to discuss. In the latter case, the Moderator will need to choose one. Next the Moderator will get an occupation from the class for each expert; e.g., President, rock star, plumber, etc. Before introducing each “expert,” the Moderator will think of a characteristic for each character presented; e.g., “Our next expert, as you well know, is President of the United States and he/she has come to speak to us about _____.” Please forgive him/her because he/she caught a cold right before coming here, and sometimes goes on sneezing jags.” The purpose of the ‘lay-on’ for

each character is that it gives them a task to do that reduces self-consciousness and keeps a focus. Then each “expert” will present on a topic from the viewpoint of the occupation with the character quality.

Review for an Exam of Quiz – Man on the Street

One player acts as a TV news anchor, who is out on the street interviewing passers-by. This is an excellent opportunity for students to play different characters they imagine might be on the street. The moderator may have a series of preplanned question, or may simply ask students to tell him/her all they know regarding a certain topic.

Yes-And

Eight to 12 students get into a circle. The only direction is that before you say anything, you must say, “Yes/And.” One way “yes-and” is used is to “brainstorm” a new product, as though everyone is in an advertising agency and they need to come up with a new product. Everyone builds on others’ creations by always accepting ideas, saying “yes-and” before their contribution, and by the end, a jingle is improvised for the product, which hadn’t existed moments before.

For classroom purposes, you may toss out a series of concepts or topics, and ask everyone to say what they know about it, always saying “yes/and” before each statement. If someone makes a false statement, see if another student can creatively correct him/her by saying “yes/and” first, and stating the facts correctly. **Note:** “Yes/And” creates possibilities, while “yes/but” inhibits communication and destroys possibilities. See “Give & Take” in the Warm-Up Exercises as another way to review or summarize a lesson.

What Do We Have in Common?

Determine beforehand how many teams you want. Have students count off by that number. For example, if you want six teams, count off by sixes. Next you ask students to walk around the room and shake hands with others, and say their numbers. When they find another with the same number they pair up, and go look for another person with that number. Now you have groups of students who are asked to:

- 1) Find out what they all have in common;
- 2) List the positive characteristics of the members of the team;
- 3) Write a poem, create a song, or silently act out what’s great about their group

Timelines or Sequencing - Interview

See “One Word Story” in the Warm-Up Exercises before doing “Interview.”

Seat four students in a row, and pick one moderator. The four students all represent one famous person in history, or a fictional character you’re studying in class. The moderator interviews *all four students who will speak as one*, by answering one word at a time in sequence. For example: “Napoleon, it’s a pleasure to have you here with us today. Tell us, how do you feel?” All four students answer one word at a time, “I-FEEL-

FINE-THANK-YOU-VERY-MUCH.” The questions may be pre-planned so a learning experience is shared by all. The answers always begin with seat #1.

Counseling Activities & Conflict Resolution – Alter Egos

If there’s a conflict situation, seat two or three students in a semi-circle, and allow each student to state his/her position. Let the scene continue and after a few minutes, ask if anyone in the audience thinks they know how any of the students are feeling. Invite these students up to be “Alter Egos.”

The alter egos’ main task is to say what the students are not saying; that is, the feelings beneath the words. How they do this is by standing behind one student each and tapping the shoulder of the person for whom they’re expressing feelings when they have something to say.

Players A, B and C (the original students) do not acknowledge what the other student’s alter egos say. They are, however, aware of what their own alter egos say. The alter-egos are to help facilitate resolution of the situation by accurately reflecting the true feelings of each student.

This sounds more difficult than it actually is. You, the teacher, will be needed to facilitate smooth operation of this format as sometimes it may be confusing, especially when more than two students are involved. Emphasize that they do not even hear the other alter-egos when they speak, only their own.

Variation: Once the scene has progressed, call out “role-reverse.” Players A, B and C plus their respective alter-egos are asked to physically move into one another’s chairs, and continue the scene from these new perspectives. Role reversals offer an opportunity for further understanding of another’s point of view. End the scene with everyone returning to their original chair and position, but hopefully with deeper understanding and clarity about the conflict.

Counseling Activities & Conflict Resolution – Role Modeling

Role Modeling is a simple variation of *Alter Egos* where once the original players have discussed the problem (only two students are suggested for this exercise), you ask if anyone has any ideas on how to resolve the situation. They are invited to come up and take someone’s place, even before they begin to explain what they would do. They have a few minutes to role model behavior and communication. Then you ask if anyone else has any ideas. This is a series of role-model demonstrations, and it culminates when the original students resume their seats, trying to incorporate new ways of communicating what they’ve seen role-modeled. Have the original two students stay up front, close to the action, so they can jump in after everyone who has any ideas that might help, has had a chance to participate.

Playing Characters & Conflict Resolution/Role Wheels

Role wheels are very simple to construct and offer a myriad of creative possibilities and situations for everyone to experience.

Get 10 to 12 students in a circle. Ask every other student to step inside, and then turn to face a partner on the outside. There is now an inner and an outer circle. You, the teacher, will now set up different roles, situations and relationships for the students to discuss, according to the class and subject you teach. For example, an English teacher might have all the characters in an assigned novel on role-cards. Then set up situations where the characters relate to one another. A history teacher may set up conversations between different historical figures, re-enacting different periods of time in history and set up roles in which students will interact.

In Wavelength's role wheel for teachers in our Communications Workshop, we set up situations for teachers to experience themselves as administrators, students, parents, and state legislators.

Give a couple of minutes to each role wheel and then move on to another situation. As may be obvious by now, the only limitation in this format is our imaginations, for it is a flexible structure that can be adapted in many ways. It also affords students opportunities to work with many different students, perhaps some with whom they wouldn't normally socialize or relate to.

Four Corners

Four participants stand in a square; each person represents a corner of that square or box. The "caller" (participant #5) will ask the class for four topics for four different scenes. The two people in the front of the box formation will be responsible for doing a scene based on the first suggestion. The "caller" will then have the box formation shift left, and give the second suggestion to the next two people forming the front of the box. This continues until all four suggestions are doled out. To be clear, each participant will be involved in two different scenes. For audience clarity, the caller should repeat the shifting process one more time, and have each pair review (call out) what their scene is about. It is then the caller's responsibility to ask one of the pairs to begin a scene. The caller watches the scene intently, waiting for a good time to shift the box and move on to another scene. The shift can be either left or right, so the scene pairs must be prepared to move accordingly. The second (and/or third or fourth) time your scene is front and center, it should continue from where it left off the last time it was shifted out of play. Don't begin a brand new scene about your topic, but move the action forward in time. Suggestions for the scenes can include: relationships, locations, hot topics or issues, or anything else deemed of interest or concern for the class.

Historical Recall

Before beginning this scene, the class is asked to provide four suggestions. The first suggestion is for an historical event. The next three suggestions are for an emotion, a movie genre (for eg. Film Noir) and a musical style. (for e.g. Opera). The cast will then do a very simple and short "base" scene about the historical event, with no more than two to three lines per person. They will then repeat the same short scene as closely as possible three more times using each of the suggested styles. The suggested styles don't have to be these three, and can be tailored to your group, but should be broad enough to have a wide variety of possibilities.

Good/Bad/Worst Advice

For this scene you will need three characters and a “host.” The premise of the “show” is that one character will give good advice, one will give bad advice, and the third will give the worst advice imaginable. The host should have the panel members introduce themselves. They can use a “character” name, tell a little about themselves, and establish which kind of advice they will be giving. “The “good advice” is usually thoughtful and honest and to the point of the question asked. The “bad” advice is questionable at best, and the “worst” advice is, of course, outrageous and utterly ridiculous. The host can request the questions all relate to a theme important to the audience, or can get free form questions on any topic.

Bring it to Life

Invite students to get up in front of the class, and act out events using the basic concepts of creating a space/environment, creating characters and engaging in activities while they reenact the scenes from history or literature. You will need to be clear in assigning roles, setting the scene(s) with a beginning, middle and end, and stepping into the scenes as needed to narrate and keep the scene(s) on track.