

Improvisation: Practical Applications and Beyond

Appropriate Grades: K – 12

Objective

- In this workshop, we will approach bringing improvisation into the classroom on two levels: 1) Through the use of simple and fun improvisational games that can be adapted to teachers' specific curricula, and 2) to integrate the broader philosophies and skills of Improvisational theater into the natural learning process.
- Participants in this workshop will understand how to:
 - **Incorporate** the philosophy of "Yes, And" into their teaching styles, and classroom culture.
 - **Utilize** the power of story to relay specific messages and ensure students retain the information
 - **Adapt** fun and easy improv games to any curricula, making the learning process interactive and engaging.
 - **Create** a sense of community and trust amongst students.
 - **Present** work to others.

This workshop can be a great link for achieving the Seattle Public Schools' Arts Standard 4: *The student makes connections within and across the arts, to other disciplines, cultures, life, and work.* Improvisation builds fundamental skills in listening, communication, creative problem solving, and confidence – skills that are applicable to all professions and walks of life.

Improvisational Warm-ups

- **Word Ball**

The purpose of this game is to start the free flow of ideas – to get out of your head and connect with someone else. The game is played standing in a circle. One person says a word, points at another person in the circle and makes eye contact, then that person sends a new word to someone else, etc. It is simply free association of words that sometimes makes sense and sometimes doesn't (e.g. "cat, dog, walk, park, cake, freedom").

Adaptation for Curriculum: Start a string of words that relate to a specific subject you are currently studying (e.g. If you were reading the Lord of The Rings, "Frodo, Bilbo, Orc, Middle Earth").
- **Categories**

This game is ultimately about brainstorming and problem solving. The game is played standing in a circle. One person names a category (e.g. "Types of Cars"), then you go around the circle and each person names something that fits in that category (e.g. "Honda, Ferrari, Volvo, Jeep, etc"). No repeats. Try and go as fast as possible.

Adaptation for Curriculum: The teacher names the category of study, and the students quickly answer with no repeats (e.g. If you were studying History – "Original Colonies of the US", "New York, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Georgia, etc").
- **Bippidy Bippidy Bop**

The main purpose of this game is to develop listening skills, and students' ability to focus. Stand in a circle, and one person enters the middle. The person in the middle approaches someone on in the circle and says "Bippidy Bippidy Bop". The objective of the person on the outside of the circle is to say the word "Bop" before the inside person finishes the phrase "Bippidy Bippidy Bop". If he/she doesn't say Bop in time, he/she is in the middle. OR the inside person can just say "Bop", and the outside person can't say anything.

 - o Next Layer = Tableaus: After Bippidy Bippidy Bop has been established, you can add tableaus. These are images three people make with their bodies when the person in the middle calls it out. For example, the middle person may point at someone and say "Elephant!", then the person she is pointing at has to become the trunk of and

elephant, and the people on either side have to become the large ears. If anyone fails to do this before the center person counts to ten, then he/she is in the middle.

Adaptation for Curriculum: You can alter the words “Bippidy Bippidy” Bop to fit your unit. For example, if you were doing a unit on geology, you could say “Rickity, Rickity, Rock!”, and then the tableaux could be “Igneous”, “Metamorphic”, “Sedimentary”, etc.

- **What Are You Doing?**

The focus of this game is to stretch your mind, body, and listening skills. Participants must be doing one action while saying another. This exercise can be done in a circle or in pairs. One person begins a physical action such as jumping rope, the next person asks, “What are you doing?” and the first person must answer something OTHER than what he is doing – anything but jumping rope. The next person then begins the action that the first one answered. Then this continues around the circle or back and forth. If the person hesitates in answering the question, repeats an action that has already been said, or answers with something that looks like what he is doing then he is out.

Adaptation for Curriculum: The teacher can “label rounds”. For example the teacher could choose to label the round “Chemistry”, in which case ALL the answers to the question “What are you doing?” must relate to chemistry in one way or another (e.g. “splitting atoms to cause nuclear fission”, “balancing an atomic equation”, etc).

- **Patterns**

The skill learned in this game is the ability to listen and communicate very specific messages amidst chaos. This game is played standing in a circle. In the first round, the group will establish one pattern – names – in which everyone in the circle says one person’s name. Practice that pattern until it is memorized. Then someone will initiate a second pattern (could be food, states, anything), and practice that pattern until it is memorized. Note that with each pattern, the person you are receiving and sending to should be different. Now practice running the first and second pattern at the same time. Add a third pattern, practice, and then try all three at once.

Adaptation for Curriculum: Select patterns that relate to your unit/curriculum. This game is great for helping students to memorize information. If they need to memorize US Capitols, do that as a round.

Introduction to “Yes, And”

“Yes, And” is the fundamental philosophy in improvisation that simply means you must accept the initial offer, and then build on it to keep the scene moving forward. The “Yes” is the acceptance of what has come before you, and the “And” is your creative addition to the offer. Not only does this philosophy keep the momentum going on scene work, but it is also extremely helpful in the classroom setting.

Yes, And in Practice:

- **Yes, And Story**

This simply story telling game is a great way to practice teamwork and listening. Sit or stand in a circle. Pretend that all of you just went on vacation together, and where it is you went. The first person starts by saying, “Remember when we went on that awesome trip to blank?”, the next person in the circle starts her sentence with “Yes, and . . .” and fills in something that happened on the trip. This continues all the way around the circle until the trip ends. The only rules are that 1) what you say has to build off what the person before you said (i.e. no “aliens landed” in the middle of a story about a castle), and 2) If something happens on the trip, it happens to ALL of us (i.e. no “then Peter threw up!”, rather “then we all threw up) – this keeps people from feeling singled out.

- **“Yes, Lets!”**

This game is a physical manifestation of Yes, And, and it’s a great way to get students working together in a physical way. Spread out in a room that has open space. One person yells out a suggestion of a physical action (e.g. “Let’s climb a Mountain!”) and then everyone yells “Yes, Lets!” and begins to pantomime the action. Students take turns yelling out a new action. They will have to learn to give and take focus so that there is never more than one person yelling out an idea at one time.

- **Dr. Know It All**

This game is tremendous fun, but the bottom line is that students must listen and practice “Yes, And” to be successful. Three students stand shoulder to shoulder. Someone from the

audience/class asks a question (e.g. “Why is the sky blue?”). The three students must answer this question as if they were one person: one word at a time (e.g. “Because” “it” “reflects” “the” “ocean”). The answer doesn’t have to be the correct one; it just has to make sense.

Adaptation for Curriculum: Have your students become the Dr. Know It All of the subject you are currently studying. Not only do they have to work together to answer the questions but also they have to have the knowledge as a team to answer the question.

- **Spellmaster**

This game builds on the Dr. Know It All skills, and has the team of three spell word that are given to them one-word-at-a-time, and then also makes the team define the word the same way. It uses team building and allows students to sound out words as well as discover the meanings of words they may not know.

Adaptation for Curriculum: Have your students become the Spellmaster and test their abilities to spell and define words from the spelling list you have. Students will have to work together, and help each other learn if they are not sure of the answer.

Story as a Communication Devise

Many people use the story and story structure to create plays and skits. But story itself has multiple adaptations to everyday communication. Since we all understand stories and they stay in our memory, the use of story structure helps to cement lessons and make students think about how they present information to others.

Story in Practice:

- **Seven Sentence Stories**

Seven-sentence story structure is a compilation of all stories, broken down to their essence. It consists of the following even sentences:

Once upon a time...

And every day...

Until one day...

And because of that...

And because of that...

Until finally...

And ever since then...

Participants can create stories by adding just the one sentence, and listening to the previous story items and adding onto them. Together, seven people will make one story by all adding in their one plot point.

Adaptation for Curriculum:

By using this structure to help create stories from lesson plans, students can easily remember and have more connection to subject material. Story also helps students to learn *how* to present messages in a way that others can understand, and find useful. Students can also create stories with each one adding in a new fact about the subject matter for each of their sentences.

- **Pop Up Story**

Pop up story allows students to make a physical representation of the story they are telling. It also allows students who may not have the verbal skills to still tell stories, but using a physical manifestation of the action. Pop up story has one person who narrates the story being told, while the other players are creating physical shapes that correspond to the story. The narrator can ‘turn the page’ to get to the next part of the story, allowing the players to create another shape for the narrator to use in their story telling.

Adaptation for Curriculum:

Since it is a still picture, like a pop-up book, the students must practice control and help a narrator tell the story. The specifics of the poses the students take could have relevancy to the material being presented (how to dig for fossils, etc) while the story can be about a specific event.

- **Advance/ Expand**

Advance/ Expand is a scene where the players will advance the story when the moderator tells them to, or they will stop moving the story forward and just silently explore their environment when the moderator tells them to “expand.” Advance/ Expand helps students understand what parts of the story are necessary – and what is irrelevant. It also helps them to

see what other parts of the story they might have forgotten in order to fully communicate the ideas they want.

Adaptation for Curriculum:

The story could be based on the curriculum that is being presented, and the expansion could be the students having to have hands on action of doing the activities associated with the lesson. The story could be about building a boat, and the expand could be the students silently figuring out what part goes where.

Other Games to Adapt

The games listed below are also a few that can be adapted for specific curriculum. Ideas and processes can be discussed during the workshop.

- **Naive Expert**

One person must go out of the room and then the rest of the group decides what the person is an expert on. They will then be invited back into the room, and interviewed on their area of expertise, even though they don't know what it is. This can allow students to have the fun of both guessing what the topic is, but also finding out what they know about that topic.

- **Just a Minute**

Three 'panelists' sit and one begins talking about a subject. If at any point they hesitate, deviate from the topic, or repeat themselves, another panelist can say 'just a minute' and then they get to take over speaking. Whoever is speaking at the end of one minute wins a point. This is really a test to see how students can listen, and demonstrate how much they know about a topic.

- **Foreign Poet**

Foreign poet has three players: one who speaks in gibberish as a foreign poet, one who then translates the poem into English, and one who performs the interpretive dance associated with the poem. The gibberish and the translator can be working together to communicate stories about a topic, as the dancer provides the fun and excitement.

A note about all the above items:

All the improvisational games listed here are examples of games we have considered for adapting. Throughout the workshop we will provide tools, and additional games to help teachers create their own formats based on what they feel will work for their style, curriculum and classroom.