

Improvisational Theater for the Classroom  
Wingsseminar 2007  
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Resources

Theater Games and Storytelling

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- Cassady, M. (1993). Acting games: Improvisations and exercises. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether.
- Johnstone, K. (1999). Impro for storytellers. NY: Routledge Books.
- MacDonald, M..R. (1993). The storyteller's start-up book: Finding, learning, performing and using folktales. Little Rock: August Little.
- Newton, B. (1998). Improvisation: Use what you know – make up what you don't (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Gifted Psychology Press.
- Novelly, M.C. (1985). Theatre games for young performers. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether.
- Rubinstein, R. (2000). Curtains up: Theatre games and storytelling. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Resources.
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- Tauber, R. T. & Mester, C. S. (1994). Acting lessons for teachers: Using performance skills in the classroom . Westport, CT: Praeger.

Identifying Talent in Theater

- Oreck, B, Owen, S, & Baum, S. (2003). Validity, reliability and equity issues in an observational talent assessment process in the performing arts. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 27 (1), 62-94
- Oreck, B. (2005). A powerful conversation: Teachers & artists collaborate in performance-based assessment. Teaching Artist Journal, 3 (4), 220-227.
- Oreck, B. (2004) Assessment of Potential Theater Arts Talent in Young People: The development of a new research-based assessment process, Youth Theater Journal, 18, 146-163.

Websites

[http://www.humanpingpongball.com/improv\\_games.html](http://www.humanpingpongball.com/improv_games.html)

<http://fuzzyco.com/improv/games.html>

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<http://www.learnimprov.com>



### **For Classroom Teachers:**

**You re trying to draw your students out, to ask** them to do something daring. So if you say something chastising, that should be intentional and very necessary; if you re going to say, "Sit down and be quiet!" it must be absolutely necessary to say it that way. It will be much more productive to say, "I need you to be quiet so that I can hear what this other student is saying. I ll ask you in a minute what that was you were saying."

**Model risk-taking with energy;** encourage the students to invest the same kind of energy.

**Allow students to lead you further.** For example, if a student is reluctant to take on a character, give them an easy choice. If this allows them to go further .push them further. If a student starts at the more advanced stage, try giving them a harder, more abstract challenge ..a metaphor, for example. Not every child gets exactly the same stimulus. The instructors have to alter the stimulus to both (1) RESPECT where the child is and (2) challenge them to their best. A student may have a natural talent in an area which has never been tapped. If they ve never tried something before and they re good at it, the next thing is to not only introduce it but to develop it. The question is not only, "Who is most talented at this moment?", but also, "Who is ready for further instruction?" Their response, interaction, and collaboration with the teacher is very important.

In some situations, a student looking directly at another could be seen as an act of aggression. In games that require eye contact, the instructors should clearly state, "In our rehearsal place, the rule is that you are not threatening someone by looking in their eyes, you re following the rules of a game."

## **IMPROVISATIONAL GAMES AND STRUCTURES**

### **Character Interview:**

The actor starts by miming a physical activity with a particular attitude (timidly cleaning out a closet, for example). The audience asks the character questions. The actor develops the character by answering.

### **Character Interview Variation:**

The actor is given some characteristics before starting, such as: they are a particular type of person in a period in history (a rich manufacturer in 1929), or a character from a work of fiction (Sam from *My Brother Sam Is Dead*). More discoveries are made about the character through the interview process.

### **Character Walk Around:**

Participants walk around the room in random patterns. They develop instant characters by changing simple things about the way they walk, and letting that affect everything else, including voice, attitude, etc. Examples: Change the part of the body that leads. Change length of stride, width of stance, pace, footfall, toes in or out, etc. This can move on to impersonating types of people in the participants lives, such as siblings, teachers, and impersonating themselves in the presence of others (parent, younger family member, someone smarter, someone who irritates them, etc.).

### **Conducted Story:**

Have four students stand in front of the class to be the storytellers. The instructor will be the conductor. The conductor will point at individual storytellers who will make up part of the story for as long as the conductor is pointing at them. As soon as the conductor stops pointing at them, they will stop talking and the next person pointed at will pick up the story exactly where the other person left off. [Variation for ESL students: Have students do conducted story in their first language, then have another student who speaks their first language and can translate into English tell the class what the story was about.]

### **Conducted Story Variation:**

Whenever one of the story tellers messes up in the handing off of the story, they must leave, perhaps performing a "death" before going.

### **Count to 20:**

The goal in this game is to count to 20: one person says one, another says 2, a third says 3 -- all the way to twenty. But there is no assigned order. If two people say a number together, the game begins again at 1.

### **Experts:**

One partner interviews the other on a made-up topic. Everything the “Expert” says is true and fascinating. Every question the “Interviewer” asks is perceptive and deserves an answer. Of course, every answer is some form of “Yes, and .

### **Gift Giving:**

One partner mimes giving the other a gift. The second partner takes the gift and, by using and talking about it, makes it clear what the gift is and says, “Thank you. [Offer, Blind Offer, Specific Offer]

### **Information Booth:**

Scenario of a character asking for information in a department store. The purpose is to help an actor develop an instant character. The actor is given a word or image upon which to instantly base whatever character comes to mind. They walk on as the character and ask for directions for whatever department they need. The information giver's sole job is to help the other actor develop their character as fully as possible. (The information giver should resist making attempts at being entertaining.)

### **Mimed Room Set-Up I:**

Without speaking, 3-5 people invent a room by, one at a time, entering the “room” and miming part of it. Each person will also, in some way, physically acknowledge the existence of the objects the previous people have mimed.

### **Mimed Room Set-Up II:**

One person will begin to set up a room by miming objects in it. The second person will come in and set up a relationship (“Hi, Mom.”) They will engage in dialogue, while finding ways to get person two to touch all the objects person one set up.

### **Mirror Pairs:**

Students work in pairs, one student moving, the other acting as the mirror. During the exercise the instructor has them switch roles.

### **N-Word Story:**

A story is told in a circle with each participant telling part of the story. In the first go-around each member of the story uses one word. The next time around each person uses two words. The number of words used to continue the story increases to four or five (whatever number the group agrees upon as the highest number) and then the number decreases with each round: 1-2-3-4-5-4-3-2-1.

### **Once Upon A Time...:**

A group story-telling exercise in which members of a class take turns starting each of the following sentences in order (the instructor may write the sentence beginnings on the board): (1) Once upon a time. ... (2) But one day. ... (3) Because of that. ... (4) Because of that. ... (5) Finally. ... (6) Ever since that day.. .The process helps students work on story structure: platform, event, consequences, climax, conclusion or resolution.

### **One Scene, Different Ways:**

The improvisors do a very short scene, then re-do it in different styles, historical settings, etc.

### **Pop Quiz:**

The instructor asks ridiculous question, any answer is correct. Ask questions that require different kinds of answers. "How many..." "Who can explain why..." "Who can demonstrate..."

### **Sound Ball:**

One person throws an imaginary ball to another person on the circle, making a sound as he throws it. The person receiving the ball catches it, making the same sound with which it was thrown. The receiver then throws the ball to another person on the circle, making a new sound.

### **Status Walk Around:**

Participants, divided into A s and B s, walk around, trying the effects of various status behaviors. Examples: Taking up a lot or a little physical space, verbal space; wavering or unwavering eye movement; steady or fidgeting movements, etc.

### **Working An Actor:**

One partner makes suggestions and asks questions that help the second partner respond imaginatively. Example: "Reach out your hand. What are you touching?" Often, non sequiturs help surprise the imagination into action. Example: "Reach out your hand. What do you hear?"

[Note: It is not important at all whether the imaginer has eyes open or closed. They will probably automatically do whichever is most comfortable for them without any coaching.]

### **Yes Game:**

In the Yes! Game everyone plays at once. Somebody shouts out a suggestion, everybody shouts, "Yes!" and then everyone does it. So if someone cries, "Let s all act like chickens!" the rest of the class shouts, "Yes!" and everyone acts like a chicken. (Point at the person who is going to make the next suggestion.)

### **“Yes, And.. Story:**

In a circle, each person adds anything he or she wants to a story as long as they begin their contribution with, “yes, and .

### **Yes-Nod:**

Person A, in the circle, looks at Person B, indicating that A wants to take the B s place. B says, “Yes.” Before B can vacate his space for A, he must look at Person C, indicating that B wants C s place. C says, “Yes” and the process continues as people change their places around the circle.

**The following games and structures require both the class and teacher to be experienced using improvisational theater in the classroom.**

### **Advertising Execs:**

A boss and advertising execs make up packaging, a slogan, celeb endorsement, TV ad, and jingle for a made-up product. They all shout, “Yes!” at every suggestion, and accept the first offer in all their tasks.

### **Emotional Car Pool:**

Four chairs are set up like the front and back seat of a car. Have an instructor be the driver. The instructor and three participating children each have an assigned emotion. It may be a good idea to have a list of emotions rather than asking for them (in the interest of saving time). The driver picks up the members of the car pool individually and as each person gets in the car their emotion overtakes everyone in the car. When each successive student gets in the car they should get in the front seat and the student who was in the front seat should move to the back seat. (Often you need to tell the students that they are playing a character so they are not embarrassed about personifying the emotion. For example, some students feel uncomfortable about playing a sad character because of crying. Remind them that it s a *character* that is crying, not them.)

### **Making Faces:**

A boss is flanked by two (or four, or six, etc.) flunkies, who behave in a low status manner when the boss can see them, and lower the boss s status by making faces behind his back when he turns away. When he catches them, they must immediately lower their status back to an acceptable level or they will be fired, to be replaced by new flunkies.

### **Slides:**

This is a slide show in which one or more students represent the slides and other students discuss the “slides.” The story or content of the slides will evolve through

both groups responding to each other's statements and actions/poses.

### **Typing:**

One instructor acts as narrator of a story by pretending to type it. While the "typist" sets up the situation, the students will collaborate in taking on characters (beginnings on the board): (1) Once upon a time. . .; (2) But one day. . .; (3) Because of that...; (4) Because of that...; (5) Finally...; (6) Ever since that day. . . The process helps students work on story structure: platform, event, consequences, climax, conclusion or resolution.

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## **“Yes, And ... Story:**

In a circle, each person adds anything he or she wants to a story as long as they begin their contribution with, “yes, and . . .and adding to the story or making suggestions as to what happens next. [Variation for ESL students: Have a bilingual student translate what the typist is saying into the language the ESL students understand.]

The class walks around the room, each individual point to various object and, loudly and confidently, calls them something they are not. For example, pointing to a chair, a person would say, “Fire engine.” Next, ask them to try not to pause or say “Uhh...” Then ask them to use unassociated words “Fire engine, tooth paste, baby, zipper,” for example, rather than, “Fire engine, fire, ashes, cigarette.”

FOR FURTHER READING (comments by Laura Livingston, of Freestyle Repertory Theater):

IMPRO by Keith Johnstone, Theatre Arts Books, 1979 (an improv classic that is out of print, well worth a trip to the library.)

DON T BE PREPARED: Theatresports for Teachers by Keith Johnstone, 1995 (needs to be special ordered, Laura Livingston has the form)

IMPROVISATION THROUGH THEATRESPORTS by Lynda Belt and Rebecca Stockley, Thespis Productions

TRUTH IN COMEDY by Charna Halpern, Del Close, Kim “Howard” Johnson, Meriwether Publishing, Ltd., 1994

THEATRE GAMES FOR THE CLASSROOM by Viola Spolin, Northwestern University Press

IMPROVISING REAL LIFE by Jo Sales, Kendall/Hunt Publications The Drama Book Shop is at 723 Seventh Avenue (near 48th St.)

These materials are intended to be used in conjunction with ArtsConnection workshops. The activities have been developed by Laura Livingston of Freestyle Repertory Theater, New York. Reprinting of these materials is prohibited except with written permission of ArtsConnection.

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