

Lesson: Un-self-conscious, 'no mistake', fun and free Improvisation.

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Introduction:

Along with many other formal exercises in Acting, Improvisation can be a great way to bond students, encourage creativity, and retain a sense of play within a classroom.

This lesson addresses some of the specific challenges with new students as well as the 'perfectionism' of more advanced performers.

These exercises and notes have been culled from intensives at Second City, work at the Roving Improv (Bonner Springs) and workshops with visiting performers.

As always, adjust as you will and use what works from this lesson.

I usually place the 'Improv' unit directly after the Trust/Group unit that begins an Introduction to Theater course.

Resources:

Jill Bernard – "Small Cute Book of Improv" & JillBernard.com

Margaret McClatchey (formerly SMN) – Rules/Guidelines for Successful Improvisation (adapted)

[improvencyclopedia.org](http://improvencyclopedia.org) – great 'games' list - for group-building or for applying certain skills.

Objective:

1. Students will exercise 'playfulness' within an Improv.
2. Students will make big choices.

Activating Prior Knowledge:

Distribute the Guidelines or 'Rules' for Successful Improvisation a day or two ahead of time while doing 'name' games, class and stage basics work. Have students pick out which guidelines make the most sense or they think applies or would be helpful to them. Note: Over time I've heard that 'there are no rules' in Improv so I've altered it to 'guidelines' thereby allowing as much freedom of expression as possible. What is successful is apparent to students!

Featured 'games' and their uses:

LOSER BALL – from Jill Bernard. This is meant to show that 'there are no mistakes' in Improv if the 'team' supports the choices of other improvisers. This is also great and supportive silliness for those who would normally miss a ball thrown to them anyway!

1. Gather in a circle.
2. Use a 'soft' ball or a pantomimed one.
3. Any student can pass to ball to another student.

4. The receiving student MUST not catch the ball. They should come up with a way to MISS the ball (Ex. It hits them in their head. They are checking their phone. They are looking up. They are adjusting their clothes.)
5. When the student MISSES the ball the entire group cheers, claps, and adlibs encouraging remarks (Ex. Great job! You missed that Sooooo well! Awesome! Very cool!)
6. Repeat until all in the circle have played.

Note: Jill Bernard also has a great acronym for 'tools' to make a character: VAPAPO - Voice, Attitude(Emotion), Posture/Physicality, (more advanced) Animal, Prop, Obsession.

THREE-LINE BURSTS – similar to the 3-line scene but less intelligible. It is meant to preempt the first thought of a performer like “What do I say?” “What if it’s not funny?” “I don’t know what to do” so that they just do it. Bernard has the “Fire-Ball Theory” where you act and react quicker than your ‘natural’ (is it right?) censor. Bursts can be sounds or words. Make big choices! Ask the kids what they thought after a ‘round’ of bursts and what they imagined might be happening or ‘would have happened’ in the scene.

1. Students gather in two lines (similar to ‘What are you doing?’) on SL and SR. The first two enter and before thinking make a noise or an emotional response to the other. (This can include the requisite Who/What/Where or be pure emotion or action).
2. The student who initiates will make a burst.
3. The student who responds with a word or sound (VAP-Voice, Attitude, Physicality).
4. The student who initiates will respond.
5. They go to the back of the line and the next two students repeat the process.

BAD SCENE or DESTROY ALL SCENENWORK – This is meant to show that a scene cannot be destroyed by another player – thereby allowing players to play ‘free from fear’. Once students have gotten a ‘hang of’ doing a solid, connected, real, interesting 2-person scene (funny or not – “play it real” and the comedy will come out of the truth) start ‘trying’ to destroy it. Jill Bernard writes, “You can’t break Improv. It can’t be done. Lots of people have tried hard and it’s still here. Don’t be afraid to get in there up to your elbows, get your hands dirty. Make a mess.”

This exercise is also helpful for advanced Improv students who are afraid to ‘edit’ or ‘enter’ a scene or are ‘in their head’ after digesting the “Guidelines”

1. Students gather in two lines (similar to the 3-line bursts).
2. The first two students try to make the worst scene possible.
3. At random send (or rotate around with numbers or another device) student into the scene to see what happens.

Repeat this: Keep side-coaching; “You didn’t quite destroy the scene. Try again.”

4. Keep cycling kids into these ‘bad’ scenes.

Oddly, when people or students feel that they cannot make a mistake or destroy a scene they will be unburdened with the right or wrong choice and the 'playing' becomes more fresh and real. Sometimes these 'bad' scenes are hilarious and great – showing that the only wrong choices (be a little careful about appropriateness and use your own judgment there) are NO choices and that the most important thing is to 'give' to the scene and support your fellow improviser.

Ask some questions like this after the exercise. What worked? What surprised you? Did this feel different than other Improv scene-work that we've done? Was it more fun? What was funny? Why? Were you in your head? Does 'trust' or 'self-consciousness' have something to do with it? How did the scenes change? Isn't it a gift to be able to 'mess with' the space and the characters in Improv? Was it fun to watch?

Conclusion: These exercises and others from numerous online or book sources can guide students into making big choices onstage and add to the character 'tool-box' that moves into scripted work. Frame these thoughts and remind students of their comments as you move forward working with telling a story in an Improvisation, exploring themes, real-life events, and 'keeping the fun' in the process!