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How Improv Can Open Up the Mind to Learning in the Classroom and Beyond

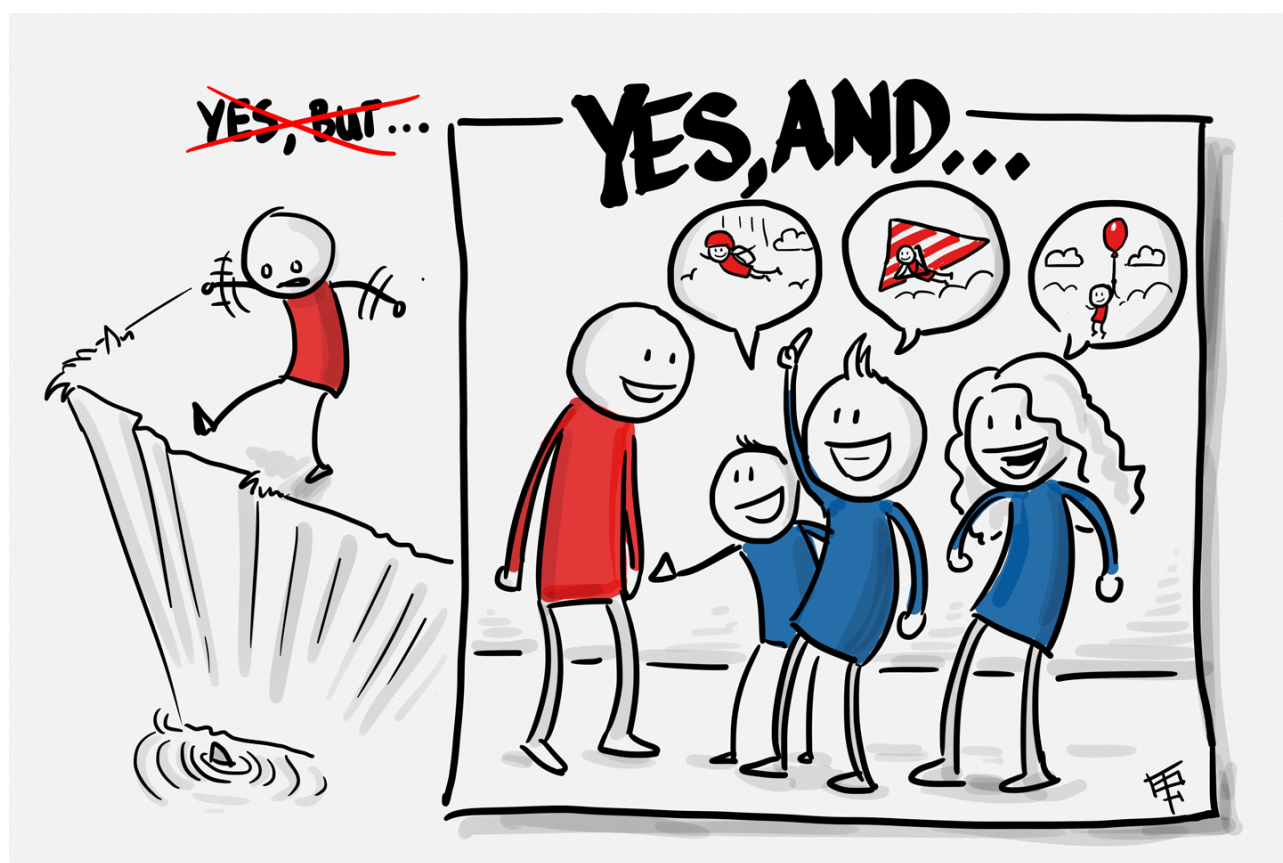


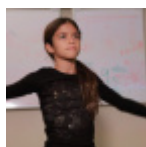
Illustration by Bauke Schildt

Long before Amy Poehler became famous for her comic roles as Hillary Clinton on "Saturday Night Live," and as indefatigable bureaucrat Leslie Knope on "Parks and Recreation," she was a college freshman looking for something to do outside class. During her first week on campus, she auditioned for the school's improvisational theater group, "My Mother's Fleabag," and discovered a passion. "Everyone was getting to act and be funny and write and direct and edit

all at the same time,” she writes in her memoir, *Yes, Please*. “My college life sort of exploded in happiness,” she adds.

What Poehler found liberating as a performer — the free-wheeling, creative and judgment-free nature of improv — is what makes it an appealing way to learn.

Improvisation is well-known as comedy and entertainment, but during the past decade it has grown as a method of teaching and learning as well, says Robert Kulhan, adjunct professor of business administration at Duke’s Fuqua School of Business, and CEO of [Business Improvisations](#). Today, improv is offered in the theater departments of many colleges and some high schools, according to Kulhan. As well, improv troupes around the country offer short workshops to school kids on specific subjects, and teach the basics of the art form in afterschool programs and summer camps. ImprovBoston, a 30-year old nonprofit comedy theater, sends staff into local schools to perform assemblies and share the fundamentals of improv to teachers and students.



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The first rule of improvisation is “yes, and,” meaning that anyone’s contribution to the group discussion is accepted without judgment. “We always talk about the four ‘c’s of improv: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication,” says Deana Criess, director of ImprovBoston’s National Touring Company, about how she teaches the

form to seventh-graders. To persuade students to abandon their fear of mistakes, she insists on unconditional support to all answers, then works to build trust among the group and invite risk-taking. “Once we have confidence in our ideas and in our teammates, we can free ourselves up to have fun,” she says. “So support, trust, risk, confidence and fun. That’s what improv is all about,” Criess says.

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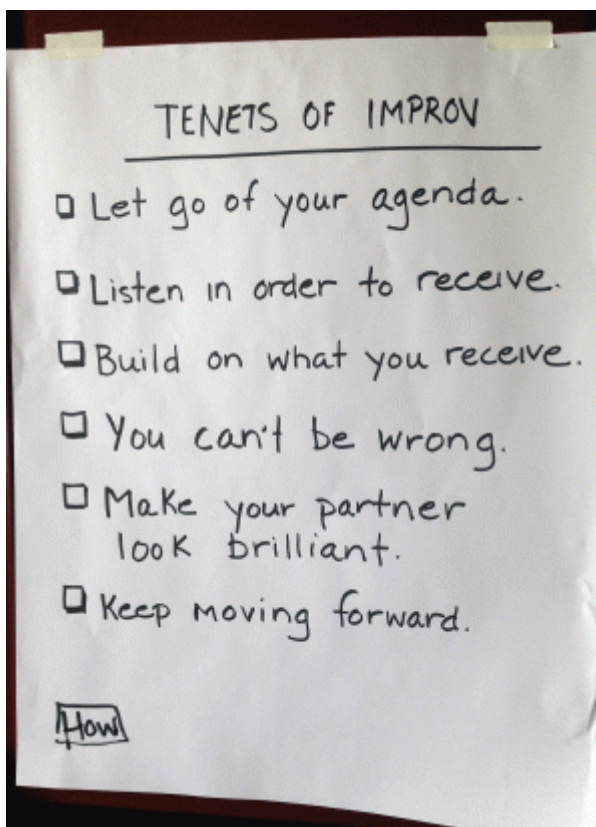


Improv enthusiasts rave about its educational value. Not only does it hone communication and public speaking skills, it also stimulates fast thinking and engagement with ideas. On a deeper level, improv chips away at mental barriers that block creative thinking — that internal editor who crosses out every word before it appears on a page — and rewards spontaneous, intuitive responses, Criess says. Because improv depends on the group providing categorical support for every answer, participants also grow in confidence and feel more connected to others.

“It’s one of the few opportunities they have to truly create something, and have a voice that isn’t prescribed for them,” Criess says about students engaged in an improv exercise. And the form’s imperative to be fully “in the zone,” as Kulhan puts it, is a rebellion against the interruptions and distractions of our modern, high-tech lives.

Improv is especially beneficial for atypical kids, no matter their stripe. It helps children with learning and physical disabilities develop a sense of play, and enables the socially awkward intellectual to socialize more easily, Kulhan explains. Run-of-the-mill introverts, who might be reluctant to raise their hands or audition for the play, also gain from the experience, Criess says. When they know they’ll be supported no matter their answer, introspective kids thrive. “Introverts give improv its richness,” she says,

adding that many improv instructors identify themselves as introverts.



Facilitators at ISKME's [Big Ideas Fest 2014](#) conveyed the improv mindset for solving problems and learning new ideas.

And improv is liberating for those in fields like science, where emotional detachment is critical for success. The Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University offers a graduate course on improv to help emerging scientists convey their ideas without resorting to textbook speak or one-sided lectures. “Improv helps the scientist re-engage with their own passions in their work, get out of their head and connected to the needs of the listener, be able to respond more freely, spontaneously and flexibly,” says Valeri Lantz-Gefroh, the improvisation coordinator at Stony Brook.

A Student’s Perspective

Lilly Hartman, now a junior at Brookline High School in Brookline, Massachusetts, took her first improv class in eighth grade, and remembers thinking it seemed cool but kind of nerve-wracking. Her first few times on stage she felt anxious about what her peers would think of her, worrying that she might do something foolish or embarrassing. But the more times Hartman did it, the less self-conscious she became, and the quicker she began to trust her own ideas and to think on her feet. “It’s about deciding to go with the flow and acting on what’s around you, and making decisions based on that,” she says. “And then feeling good about those decisions,” she adds.

Unlike the classroom, where the learning environment is often tense and competitive, an improv setting builds enthusiasm among the participants, Hartman explained. “When you’re performing, it’s not competitive,” she says, and the trust that the performers build with one another is rewarding in itself. Acknowledging that math and English classes teach important skills, Hartman says that her improv work has been more personally transformative. “Improv helps you change on the inside,” she says. Without it, “I would be a more scared and quiet person,” she says. In fact, she adds, “I wouldn’t be the same person.”

Improvisation Exercises

Improv works cumulatively, so that a group ordinarily starts with a simple task and moves on to more challenging assignments once they’ve loosened up and begun to trust one another. Kulhan offers these two simple introductory examples:

One-Word Story: In this exercise, a group of individuals tells a cohesive story one word at a time. It starts when one person says a single word, and unfolds when someone else in the group offers up another word. Groups can do this in circles, so the participants know when it's their turn to talk, or at the will of the teacher, adding a randomness to the exercise. The improvising continues until the group has created a story. "It takes a lot of focus, concentration, adaptability, flexibility, attentive listening, etc., just to create a single sentence ... let alone a whole story," Kulhan says.

Conducted Story: This is more advanced than the one-word story. Here, participants form a line with the teacher up front, who behaves like the conductor of a line orchestra. When the conductor points to a student, that person talks for as long as the conductor remains pointing — perhaps just a couple of words, or maybe a few sentences. But as soon as the conductor turns to another student, the first talker must stop immediately and allow the second speaker to take over the narrative. The conductor moves haphazardly, forward and back through the line, lending even more unexpected twists to the story.

Variations of improv are also useful in helping revitalize a sleepy or distracted class or to introduce more proactive kinds of learning:

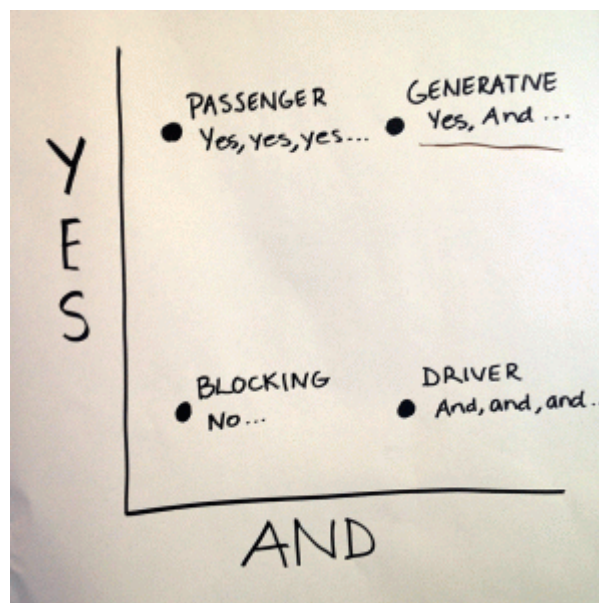
Shakeout Exercise: Together, the teacher and class stand at their desks and count backward from eight to one — then seven to one, and six to one, etc. — saying the number out loud as if it's the most important word they've ever heard. While counting, they also shake their right

hands in keeping with the number. Then they do the same series of countdowns while moving their left hand, then their right leg, and finally their left leg. “It’s superpowerful,” says Criess, “and doing it together can teach kids and adults it’s OK to look foolish in front of each other.”

Living Wax Museum/Historical Talk Show: Students pick an important historical figure to research, and later “become” that person, improvising answers to questions posed by fellow classmates, visiting parents or the talk-show “host”.

An Aid for Teachers and Schools

Inviting kids of all types to engage together in improv exercises reinforces the values that most schools seek, Criess says. With its emphasis on support and acceptance of all ideas, improv’s “yes, and” code penetrates social tribes and teaches kids to see the positive in their peers, creating a healthier climate at school. “It helps kids be positive community members,” she says.



Facilitators at ISKME's Big Ideas Fest 2014 conveyed the "Yes, and" mindset for solving problems and learning new ideas.

Training in improv may help teachers be more effective as well. Criess began learning improv while working in a preschool for children on the autism spectrum, and found herself applying the lessons from theater to the class. "What I was doing there with adults is exactly what these kids needed," she says. Improv class helped her work with the kids on their level rather than according to a preconceived idea about what they needed to know.

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It also reminds teachers that listening and responding to students, and adapting to their needs, is more educational than obeying a rigid teaching plan, Kulhan explains. "It's communication based on observation, collaboration, and not teaching with blinders on," he says. Teachers might also find that kids are energized and more attentive after engaging in simple improv exercises that induce everyone to look ridiculous together.

But does "yes, and" diminish one's ability to think critically? Are there limits to all the right answers? "Improv says yes to the idea of ideas," Criess says. Not every original thought will turn into the next invention, but offshoots of that first idea may lead to better ones, she explains. "Let's agree to have ideas," she says. "And set up a culture where

risks are encouraged, and greeted positively and with respect.”

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