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Improv(ing) the Academy: Applied Improvisation as a Strategy for Educational Development

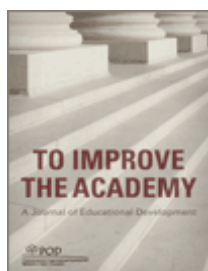
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Abstract

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Improvisational theater training (or “improv”) is a strategy employed by many business leaders and educators to cultivate creativity and collaboration amid change. Drawing on improv principles such as “Yes, And...” and “Make your scene partners look good,” we explore the ways in which educational developers might apply principles of improv in 3 contexts: teaching and building classroom community, organizational development, and research collaboration. Faculty developers who successfully engage the principles of improv have the potential to help colleges and universities respond more effectively to complex problems and to manage the uncertainty of the future. By highlighting successful applications of improvisation principles across higher education, we hope to spark further discussion and research on how applied improvisation might be a strategy for overcoming resistance to change and encouraging an environment where innovation is valued.

Setting the Scene

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A committee has been charged with discovering ways to implement more interdisciplinary and team-taught, problem-based learning (PBL) experiences across the general education curriculum. Several faculty (tenured, tenure-track, and non-tenure track), administrators, and advisors comprise the committee. The proposal will require innovative thinking about faculty course load due to both the time required to mentor and evaluate students in PBL courses and the additional collaboration time of team teaching. Administrators must consider how the interdisciplinary nature of this new approach will effect allocation of credit hours and financial resources. With the scene set, we present two hypothetical meeting scenarios.

Hypothetical Meeting A

The meeting begins with several faculty voicing concerns over “giving up” course content in order to make room for the new projects. An assistant professor meekly replies, “I don't know. I'm kind of excited to reimagine how I might teach my course.” A senior faculty member on the committee reminds him, “But, this process will be time consuming and you need to be thinking about your research and getting tenure right now.” The department chair chimes in, “I simply cannot see this proposal working. Our department would lose too many credit hours.” A senior advisor replies, “On top of that, we tried this ten years ago. Doesn't anyone remember? The proposal came to a screeching halt at faculty senate.” Despite general consensus about the positive learning outcomes of PBL, the committee has already positioned itself to reject the idea. As the discussion continues, a few stronger voices dominate the conversation. Ultimately, the committee decides to recommend a less administratively burdensome approach to the provost.

Hypothetical Meeting B

At the start of the meeting, the committee chair suggests that the members begin with a warm-up activity as a way to get to know one another and open the floor for ideas. In *Word-at-a-Time Story*, the committee members collaborate to tell a coherent story, but as they go around the table, each individual can only add one word at a time. Next, the committee participates in another short activity, *Parts of a Whole*. One person offers a suggestion, for example “vacation at the beach.” The rest of the committee must silently organize themselves into a scene that corresponds to the suggestion. Two people might kneel and pretend to build a sand castle. Another might pretend she is dipping her feet in the cold water. Together, the team adopts roles that complete the tableau. After each activity, the chair leads the group in conversation about the mindset needed to complete each game. As the conversation continues, committee members indicate that their perspectives were changed because no one person's interests or ideas outweighed the others; rather, they each had to contribute collaboratively toward a greater whole. Another participant indicates that the group worked best together when members were not resisting the concept but rather when an idea was accepted and fully explored.

Following these committee warm-ups and the discussion of these outcomes, the work of the meeting begins. Focused on the collective curriculum rather than “my class,” the faculty members together explore the possibility of trading some disciplinary content in favor of deep, experiential learning. Primed to look for (rather than block) opportunities, senior and junior faculty work together to imagine how engaging in interdisciplinary, integrative teaching might enrich rather than restrict a complementary research agenda. The committee reviews a similar proposal from a decade earlier, looking for opportunities to learn and adapt what seemed to work well.

“Gaming” a Committee

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Viola Spolin (1999), the mother of modern improvisation, believed that an approval/disapproval paradigm kept her theater students from full, rich experiences—in acting and in life. Students could not move forward in their acting if they were too fearful of winning the approval of others, of being judged, of failure. Spolin developed a series of experiential games that would help students free themselves to explore new ideas, trust one another, and encourage that all voices are heard. “When it bogs down,” Spolin (1999) stressed, “play a game” (xiii).

Confronted with the opportunity to step into the unknown, the committee in Hypothetical Meeting A typifies an approval/disapproval mindset common in higher education (HE). This way of approaching problems tends to emphasize the “critical” in “critical thinking” and maintains the status quo. Change is met with caution and resistance. This mindset has prompted many scholars to conclude that the culture of HE sometimes tends to squelch creativity and innovation rather than cultivate it (Brewer & Tierney, 2011; Doss, 2015, February; Enarson, 1960; Getz, Siegfried, & Anderson, 1997). HE has bogged down; it is time to play a game.

Improvisational theater training (or “improv”) has the potential to cultivate the creativity and collaboration required to respond more effectively to complex problems in HE. Outside the academy, some business leaders have turned to improv as a way to address the innovation gaps in their own environments (Bluestein, 2014; Scinto, 2014; Stevenson, 2014). Principles of improv, such as supporting your partner, listening closely for opportunities, and giving ideas the opportunity to develop, can engender a culture that promotes innovation and creativity. This new approach, sometimes called “applied improv,” has been gaining traction in multiple disciplines. Educators in the K-12 sector, who are playing improv games in the classroom to build a supportive learning environment (Lobman & Lundquist, 2007; Sawyer, 2007). Kaplan et al. (2006) at the University of Michigan, have been using theater (though not entirely improvisational) in educational development (ED) for many years. Even health and life sciences have found value in improv games. Programs like those at the Alan Alda Center for Communicative Science (Alda Center, 2015; Robeznieks, 2014) and the Medical Improv course at Northwestern University (Watson, 2011) use improv training to encourage scientists, physicians, nurses, and healthcare practitioners to be more reflective and collaborative.

HE has much to gain from considering the applications of improvisation as a tool for creating an organizational culture in which faculty and institutions are prepared to manage the change and uncertainty of the future. In this article, we explore the ways in which educational developers might apply the principles of improv in three contexts: teaching and building classroom community, organizational development, and research collaboration.

Philosophy of (Applied) Improv

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Modern improvisational theater emerges from the work of Viola Spolin (1999) and Keith Johnstone (1979/2012). These theater educators and theorists developed and refined signature pedagogies for teaching improvisational theater performance. Their pedagogical approaches rely heavily on games and exercises to promote spontaneity, adaptability, and creativity in actors and to heighten self-awareness and group communication among ensembles. Spolin originally developed her theater games system to train children in the art of acting at the Young Actors Company in Hollywood, CA. Later, she used her game rubric with the Compass players, the first professional improvisational theater group in the country, which eventually evolved into the world-renowned Second City group. Spolin's games focus on specific acting techniques, and together, the games comprise a system that promotes intuition, spontaneity, and heightened awareness of both self and other. Johnstone (1979/2012) began as a playwright for the Royal Court Theater before teaching theater and improvisation at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where he developed his improvisation pedagogy. He later refined his system as a professor at the University of Calgary, where he also established the Loose Moose Theater Company. Like Spolin, Johnstone developed games that explore technical problems such as playing with status and storytelling and games that inspire spontaneous, collaborative creation among participants.

Spolin and Johnstone understood their work as transcending the stage. Theater represented an “informal classroom where life experiences can be fleshed out collaboratively in order to re-create genuine behavior relationships, and imaginative stories spontaneously and in dialogue with the public” (Dudeck, 2013, p. 1). For this reason, their games and exercises gave rise to the field of applied improvisation, an approach that adapts improvisational theater training to new environments. The field aims not to train laypeople in methods of acting or comedy; rather, it approaches improvisation as a process or a way of thinking and acting. Specifically, applied improvisation uses “principles, tools, practices, skills and mindsets of improvisational theater in non-theatrical settings, that may result in personal development, team building, creativity, innovation, and/or meaning” (Tint & Froerer, 2014, p. 2). This burgeoning field has become popular in business and professional settings (e.g. Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Lowe, 2000). Professional developers use improv games as a strategy to enhance capacities for communication, teamwork, adaptability, and innovation. It is no surprise that these skills align with the goals of liberal education as posited by AAC&U's liberal education for the 21st century (Humphreys, 2006).

Emergent in the original and secondary literature on improvisation are four central principles of applied improvisation: (a) accept all offers, (b) recognize gifts, (c) build on every idea, and (d) support fellow players.¹ The improv mantra “Yes, and” encompasses the first three tenets. Saying “yes” means an improviser accepts any offer her fellow players present; she will not block or reject ideas. Johnstone (1979/2012) calls blocking “a form of aggression,” a default response to fear of the unknown or giving up control (p. 96). To think like an improviser is to reverse this tendency and become open to allowing the action to develop by accepting the ideas of the ensemble. Furthermore, saying “yes” means that a player is alert and listening to all the offers a scene partner presents. Because improvisation traditionally uses no props or costumes, improvisers must recognize everything that their ensemble says and does as a “gift” or “offer” that they might use to advance the scene. In other words, improvisers develop a strong sense of presence, so they can attend to the complexities of every statement, tone, gesture, and expression. The principles of acceptance and recognizing offers mean improvisers do not make “mistakes.” Misspoken words, mistaken identities, and other so-called errors do not appear as problems but as opportunities to advance a story in new directions. The “and” of “yes, and” recognizes that a story cannot move forward through acceptance alone. Every improviser shares responsibility for building on offers and extending them in some way. “And” represents the need to develop ideas and let them grow. Improvisation is fundamentally an ensemble art. Thus, another improv mantra—“Make your ensemble look good”—follows from “Yes, and” and emphasizes the importance of support in improvisation. Good improvisers do not steal the spotlight and outshine one another. They collaboratively co-construct a compelling story. Spolin (1999) writes, “Group participation and agreement . . . open the way for harmony” in an ensemble, a sense that “fellow players are needed and welcomed.” This collaborative atmosphere creates space for players to solve problems “not at the expense of another person . . . by working harmoniously together with others to enhance the group effort or project” (pp. 11–12). Improvisers make one another look good by saying yes to one another's offers and honoring those offers by using them to develop a story.

When improvisers practice accepting, exploring, and heightening one another's offers, they cultivate a trust-filled environment that frees them to play and empowers them to take competent risks. These skills have made applied improvisation workshops popular in business and professional contexts. For instance, Bob Kulhan, founder of Business Improvisations, developed an improv training program for MBA students at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business before expanding the program to other business schools such as Indiana University, UCLA, and Columbia University (Stevenson, 2014). These programs use improvisation games to enhance communication and presentation skills, develop leadership capacities, practice adaptability, improve presence with co-workers and clients, promote creativity and effective brainstorming, and much more (e.g., Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Lowe, 2000; Scinto, 2014; Stevenson, 2014). This recent investment in improvisation training demonstrates how the principles and practices of improvisation are “invaluable tool[s] for all who must manage, grow, solve problems, build teams, resolve conflict, organize, lead, teach, or learn” (Lowe, 2000, p. 7). Since these tasks are essential in HE contexts, it is reasonable to assert that the tenets and practices of applied improvisation would also prove valuable to the challenges facing HE and ED. Table 1 summarizes these central improvisation guidelines and previews how these ways of thinking could influence teaching, organizational development, and collaborative research teams in HE settings.

Table 1. Principles of Improvisation and Applied Outcomes

Improvisation		
Guideline	Definition	Example
Say “Yes, and”	Accept all	A “yes, and” mindset in the classroom fosters a supportive

<p>Say “yes, and”</p>	<p>Accept all offers that others make. Avoid blocking or denying offers.</p> <p>Build on every offer. Discover what can be added to advance/enhance the idea.</p>	<p>A “yes, and” mindset in the classroom fosters a supportive learning environment in which students feel comfortable taking risks and exploring knowledge.</p> <p>Likewise, a university committee charged with proposing ways to respond to a new general education curriculum would benefit from a “yes, and” orientation to help prevent them from getting stuck critiquing the new guidelines and the potential solutions.</p>
<p>Recognize everything as a gift</p>	<p>Practice presence and mindfulness about interpersonal and organizational variables.</p> <p>Reframe errors and mistakes as opportunities.</p>	<p>HE organizations responding to change can benefit from this adaptable orientation to quickly recognize needs and leverage missteps into opportunities.</p> <p>An administrator who is receiving push back for lack of communication about a new initiative, for example, could reframe the issue as an opportunity to connect with faculty by hosting a town hall and visiting key committee meetings.</p>
<p>Make your scene partner look good</p>	<p>Recognize collaborators as equal partners.</p> <p>Avoid ego-centered mindsets that hinder collaboration.</p>	<p>Research teams require trust and support among collaborators as well as respect for multiple areas of expertise and perspectives. Applying this guideline moves faculty and students away from the “independent scientist” perspective and toward a framework for team science, one that values diversity and interdisciplinarity.</p> <p>For instance, a physician with this mindset may be more apt to work with a cultural geographer to understand the logistical challenges faced by patients who live in a food desert.</p>

Improv Contexts in HE

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Three core areas of HE and ED would benefit from applying the principles and practices of improvisation: teaching, organizational development, and research teams.

Improv in the Classroom

Principles of improvisation point toward innovative approaches to teaching and pedagogy. The far-reaching impact of Spolin (1999) and Johnstone's (1979/2012) systems attest to the power of improvisational training as a signature pedagogy in theater. However, as educators have adapted these games and practices across disciplines, the potential has emerged for creating strong learning communities, inspiring inquiry and curiosity, and promoting deep learning. Improv becomes an antithesis to knee-jerk or negative responses to novel and unfamiliar ideas, allowing both learners and teachers to inquire and discuss freely. Moreover, the process of teaching is often improvisational in nature. Dynamic classrooms are unpredictable as learning opens new pathways and possibilities for participants to explore. Deep, transformational learning requires collaborative, co-creative interactions among an ensemble of participatory faculty and learners.

Improvisation has entered education at all levels: primary, post-secondary, and professional education. Lobman and Lundquist (2007), for example, urge primary educators to employ improv activities to promote a collaborative environment in which students and teachers understand themselves as part of an ensemble of learners that must work together and support one another. Applying improvisation practices in the classroom disrupts the hierarchical model of the knowledge-holding teacher and passive learners and, instead, appears to cultivate an environment in which all learners call on one another for help and share responsibility for the learning process. Lobman and Lundquist (2007) also present improvisation as a strategy for specific content delivery for language learning, mathematics, history, writing, and other disciplines.

Although the playfulness of improv and its reliance on games might invite resistance in HE, educational developers would be remiss not to apply these principles and practices in post-secondary and professional education. Berk and Trieber (2009), for instance, suggest that improvisation allows students to learn through experiential discovery and collaboration, which, in turn, promotes deeper learning. They offer four adaptations of Spolin's theater games that help students across multiple content areas to review, to synthesize, to apply, and to evaluate material. Moreover, they highlight the utility of these improv games for assessing student knowledge throughout a course. College English professors have also advocated for the application of improvisation principles to the teaching of composition (Holm, 2010; Kreiser, 2014).

Professional, post-undergraduate education boasts the widest applications of improvisation in HE. Medical schools across the country have started to implement courses in "Medical Improv," a program of study developed by Katie Watson and Belinda Fu at Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine (Watson, 2011). Medical educators have found that applied improvisation activities prove particularly valuable in promoting communication skills such as empathy (Alda Center, 2013; Hoffman, Utley, & Ciccarone, 2008; Reilly, Trial, Diver, & Schaff, 2012). Schools of business, and management programs in particular, also feature applied improvisation pedagogy in professional graduate education. Crossan (1998) has argued that practicing principles of improvisation in management training helps people perceive opportunities and threats to their organizations, identify strategies for facing challenges, become more flexible leaders, and become more supportive of a team of co-workers. Huffaker and West (2005) have also turned to improvisation in the management classroom both to cultivate a communal learning environment in which students felt comfortable taking risks and to offer experiential learning activities about alternative leadership models, such as bottom-up leadership.

Improv and Organizational Development

Applied improvisation also has the potential to be a powerful tool to address the organizational challenges faced by faculty and HE institutions today. Organizations frequently have trouble breaking their familiar patterns and responses (Crossan, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2004). An improvisation mindset may prove valuable insofar as it encourages leaders to stop trying to control their environment and instead learn from it and act spontaneously in that environment.

Historically, Weick (1989) has interrogated the role of improvisation in organizations and organizational development. While organizations resist improvisation because of their bureaucratic nature, Weick (1989) contends that improvisation is inherent in the process of organizing. Drawing comparisons from jazz improvisation, Weick argues that anytime we commit to an idea or make a decision, we are improvising. The author explains, “[c]ommitment, in other words, focuses the improvisation of meaning, and generates the content that supplies the meaning of improvisation” (p. 246). Yanow's (2001) treatment of the possibilities of improvisation in organizational learning is especially salient for HE contexts. Three specific areas connect HE and organizational learning. Organizational learning: (a) occurs dynamically as an organization is changing; (b) takes place within the context of a group or team; (c) is not always visible and conventionally measured (Yanow, 2001). Since educational developers are often change agents within their institutions (Schroeder & Associates, 2014), improv can become an important organizational development tool. As Yanow (2001) explains, “The establishment of collective, practice-oriented familiarity and trust enable improvisatory acts directed toward an organization's or group's purpose under conditions that foster other-directed care and undistracted attention to that purpose” (p. 59). Educational developers are often called to lead committees and engage faculty in decision-making processes that move an institution in a new direction. Consider the power of working with faculty members on these programs or initiatives when they are devoting their full attention and are entirely supportive of the goal of the group.

The success of the CRLT players at the University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) provides an important model for how the concepts of applied improvisation have been successful at promoting organizational change. Since 2000, Kaplan et al. (2006) have been investigating the effectiveness of using interactive theater as a way to address issues of diversity among faculty and in the classroom. They present an institutional problem in theatrical form (such as a difficult tenure decision meeting) and then invite the audience to discuss the problems in the scene and even participate in the sketch (Kaplan et al., 2006). These experiential approaches, such as “asking questions and offering suggestions—lead to faculty awareness of the toll that these situations can have on others. Faculty remember precisely the sketches long after the performance because of their emotional impact” (Kaplan et al., 2006, p. 37).

Another area of opportunity exists in the connection between ED and improv: coaxing faculty toward the nimbleness required in a constantly changing HE environment. Educational developers interact with faculty in areas such as teaching development, new faculty orientation, academic writing, and assessment, all areas where faculty will be exposed to feedback and change. By engendering the principle of flexibility, educational developers help faculty to address the innovation challenge presented previously. Chism (1998) argues that faculty developers have an opportunity to serve as a “friendly critic” during change initiatives on campus. By “embracing ‘hitches,’” developers can “help the organization embrace these challenges rather than act defensively or ignore the information” (Chism, 1998, p. 143). Huffaker et al. (2003) offer a variety of examples to illustrate the extent to which flexibility can lead to innovation in organizations. Organizations regularly experience contradictory inputs. For example, how can an auto manufacturer promote the message of quality service while managing a recall? In this scenario, the principle of flexibility and “everything is a gift” provide a scenario for growth. The same approach could apply to faculty and institutions. Consider a faculty member whose research agenda has dried up. Rather than seeing this situation as an insurmountable challenge, an educational developer could help this faculty member reframe this situation as a “gift” or an opportunity to retool and examine an area he or she has always wanted to explore. This orientation toward flexibility and growth has been shown to be a positive driver in promoting faculty satisfaction and productivity (O'Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008). As Chism (1998) contends, educational developers are uniquely situated to help universities manage change. They can “...help a team think about process, support the work with enthusiasm and empathy for the difficulties involved in change, and actually perform some tasks” (p. 144). The principles of improv provide a valuable framework for faculty and organizations to consider the challenges they face in a new light, one that embraces flexibility and change.

Improv, Research Teams, and Collaboration

Limited federal funding and complexities in scientific research have prompted colleges and universities to move away from promoting the ideal of the independent scientist (Massy & Zemsky, 1994). Moreover, increased expectations for interdisciplinary scholarship and engaged scholarship with community partners amplifies the need for faculty with keen capacities for collaborative research. No longer can the lone scholar labor in isolation. Now, many institutions are favoring a team science approach, one in which faculty members work together toward a common outcome (Stokols, Hall, Taylor, & Moser, 2008). No team looks alike; participants can be from the same or multiple disciplines, institutions, and/or geographic locations.

Keith Sawyer's work *Group Genius* (2007) illustrates the value of teams in scientific innovation. Sawyer's research indicates that an increasingly small fraction of scientific papers are published by sole authors. Additionally, single-authored papers are less influential than those published by teams, as indicated by citation counts (Sawyer, 2007). However, conducting research in a team-based setting can be challenging for faculty who have been encouraged to establish an independent, national reputation. In a study of the communication competence of interdisciplinary research teams, Thompson (2009) found that many of the skills engendered by applied improv were important to building successful scientific research collaborations. The author contends that “spending time together, practicing trust, discussing language differences, and engaging in team tasks” often encouraged a more productive team. Alternatively, “unproductive debates of expertise, expressions of boredom, and jockeying for power” often deterred the team's ability to communicate effectively (Thompson, 2009, p. 278). As this study illustrates, this shift in the nature of scientific work calls for new training for scientists, training that is focused on collaborative efforts.

Given these changes in the nature of faculty work and scholarly research, applied improvisation may prove valuable for developing stronger research teams and environments of rich scholarly collaboration. Gagnon, Vough, and Nickerson (2012), for instance, describe a model of “affiliative leadership” based on improvisational theater skills that exemplify the collaborative and collectivist norms necessary for emergent models of interdisciplinary research and team science. Their affiliative leadership model identifies three core principles: accepting multiple perspectives, cultivating trust among colleagues, and relinquishing individual control in favor of shared control. Because improvisational theater is inherently egalitarian—members of the ensemble must share responsibility for the outcomes

of the performance—Gagnon et al. (2012) suggest that applying the principles and lessons from improvisational theater will develop affiliative leadership skills. Namely, as outlined above, skilled improvisation requires openness to ideas, active listening, trust, and support. Gagnon et al. (2012) have organized a series of applied improvisation workshops for leadership training from which they conclude, “[t]he leadership which improvisation can assist in developing, is egalitarian and democratic in orientation” (p. 320).

Evidence of applied improvisation's benefits for research teams abounds. Physicist Uri Alon, for instance, advocated for the application of the principles of improvisational theater to collaborative research in the sciences at the TEDGlobal 2013 Conference. As Alon (2013) describes, science requires leaps into the unknown. Research is never a neat process from hypothesis to conclusion; researchers invariably get lost and stumble through their investigations, which, when experienced in isolation, can produce negative emotions, anxiety, and doubt. Alon illustrates how he has applied principles of improvisation, such as supporting one's team members and “Yes and,” in order to foster supportive environments in which scientists might “walk into the unknown together” (7:40).

The calls for engaged scholarship demand not only strong partnerships among researchers but also strong relationships with public partners and private funders. Toward this end, the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University uses improvisational theater techniques to train faculty to communicate effectively with those outside their discipline (Robeznieks, 2014). The Alda Center stresses scientists' responsibility to communicate the meaning and implications of their research to the public and, specifically, to develop strong relationships with public officials who need access to scientific findings for sound decision making. Using a curriculum based on Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* (1999), the Alda Center trains graduate and medical students, post-docs, and senior researchers in medicine and science to connect and engage skillfully with public partners.

Applying Applied Improv

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As illustrated by these examples, the growing field of applied improvisation promises important contributions to the work of ED. The skills, principles, and practices of improvisational theater are particularly well-suited to respond to the current challenges in HE contexts. Specifically, applied improvisation develops skills closely linked to those needed for effective teaching, organizational development, and collaborative research. We have argued that educational developers turn toward improvisational theater tenets and training and apply them creatively in response to changes in HE. However, it is not enough to simply encourage faculty and administrators to embody a “yes, and” mindset or to remind them to embrace mistakes as opportunities. Improvisers, like skilled athletes or musicians, continually practice these skills through games and exercises designed to strengthen their abilities. Applied improvisation adapts these games to non-theater contexts by inviting participants to practice skills such as listening, trusting one another, solving problems creatively, and adapting to uncertainty. Through experience, practice, and reflection, participants reinforce the importance and value of improvisational ways of thinking in the applied context. The following section provides three sample scenarios for each of the areas discussed in the previous section: classroom, organizational development, and research collaboration. For each context, we offer an improv game and potential debriefing questions. A quick web search or consultation with several training books will provide details on the specific instructions and procedures for these games.² As such, our goal in this section is not to provide detailed instructions on each particular game but rather to provide specific examples for how these games could best be used within the HE context.

Improv Applied in the Classroom: Distracted Students

A faculty member visits a teaching center to seek help for a class that seems distracted and disengaged. Before class, her students do not talk to each other and silently focus on their smart phones and social networks. This reticence to engage one another continues into class as students seem reluctant to respond to classroom discussion prompts, perhaps fearful of giving the “wrong” answer. She also notes that academic anxieties (worrying about an upcoming test) or stresses in personal life (a troubled relationship) seem to distract her students' attention and limit their mental presence in class.

An educational developer suggests that the professor begin the next few class sessions with a short improvisation warm-up game designed to bring focus to the group, to develop a more cooperative climate, and to allay some concerns about making mistakes. The first game requires the class to stand in a circle, close their eyes, and collectively count to 20 without an established pattern and without deciding in advance who will say the next number. Only one student can say a number at a time, and no one can offer two numbers in a row. If more than one student says a number at the same time, the count resets to one, and the group tries again. Typically, groups require several restarts before successfully reaching 20, which provides an opportunity to discuss that “mistakes” are not final; rather, they provide opportunities to reset and try again. As the group resets the count back to one, the focus and concentration tends to mount; students who initially tried to rush through the count slow down and listen for cues that others might be willing to speak. A post-exercise discussion can explore the different states of focus and the experience of clearing other concerns from one's mind in order to be present with the activity. Ultimately, success requires collaboration and input from the majority of the group. A debriefing conversation could explore what it felt like to rely on the whole group and on the importance of shared responsibility for contributing to the count (or to the classroom discussion). Additional debriefing questions include: When were you most focused? When were you most distracted? What did it feel like to heighten your attention during this activity? How could focusing in this way help you in the classroom? The faculty member could begin the next few classes with warm-up games like “Zip, Zap, Zop” or “Clap Pass.”

Improv Applied for Organizational Development: Spinning Wheels in a Committee

A faculty committee is revising a department's promotion and tenure guidelines. The committee is at an impasse due to different opinions regarding the value of applied scholarship versus traditional publication. Conversations at each meeting circle around the same debates without forward progress, and the committee members are beginning to feel disrespected and less trusting. As a way to help build openness and collaboration, one of the committee members suggests they play a game called “Two by Three.” The committee members get into pairs and choose whether they will be person A or B. First, the partners count to three aloud like this,

A: One.

B: Two.

A: Three.

B: One.

A: Two.

B: Three.

The game leader encourages the pairs to move quickly. Then, he asks person A to replace the number one with a sound or a gesture. When this works well, he asks person B to do the same. When the game leader debriefs this activity, he asks the committee members to focus on the cooperation necessary to make the changes work. By relying on one another to accomplish the task, the committee members are building trust. If the pair makes a mistake, they simply begin again, taking safe risks and embracing the opportunity. Other debriefing questions might include: When did you feel successful? When did you feel frustrated? Why? How does it feel to move quickly, without worrying about mistakes? Participants must rely upon one another when they struggle with the pattern; if one person drops the pattern, the pair must restart together. The game leader ends by talking about how they might use these activities to “reset” the group when they feel stuck. Ultimately, a game like this can help a group to move past the power structures at play and look for common ground. Other games that allow committee members to practice these mindsets include “Word-at-a-Time Story” or “Giving Gifts.”

Improv Applied for Research Collaboration

A faculty member receives a new grant and assembles a team of graduate students, lab techs, and faculty to work on the interdisciplinary project. She gets everyone in place and opens her new lab, excited about the discovery possibilities on the horizon. Within a few weeks, she hears rumblings that the graduate students are complaining about turf, and the faculty members do not have a clear sense of who should be assigned work. The faculty member assembles everyone in a room to work on role descriptions and discuss authorship. However, before they get down to business, she opts to play a couple of games to help the team get to know one another as well as establish trust and a shared sense of responsibility. As a starting point, the faculty member chooses a game called “Word Patterns.”

She asks everyone on the team (faculty, staff, and graduate students) to put their hand in the air. She then asks someone in the group for a category, like fruits and vegetables. One person starts by pointing to another in the circle and saying a word that fits the category (such as “kiwi”). The second person points at another participant and says another word in the category. The participants continue until everyone has named a fruit, and it returns to the original person. They repeat the same pattern with the same connections and the same words several times. Once that pattern seems set, the participants repeat the process with a new category and new connections. She explains that the group will start the second pattern again but then will begin the first pattern simultaneously. The group's task is to make both patterns run smoothly. Typically, one of the patterns gets “dropped” because someone did not hear their cue or was not paying attention. The faculty member encourages the team to develop a strategy to try to pick the pattern back up.

The debrief of the exercise focuses on the importance of shared responsibility. Participants cannot simply say their word and disengage, believing their job is done. Success requires making sure each connection is strong and remembering that everyone shares responsibility for continuing the pattern successfully, not simply for their individual contribution. The team is able to talk about the importance of supporting one another and personal accountability. Debriefing questions might include:

- What made this activity difficult? Why was it harder when a second pattern was introduced?
- How is this a metaphor for collaborating on a research team?
- What strategies did you use to stay connected with those before and after you?

Like the faculty member with the grant, we are often asked to take on multiple responsibilities within research collaborations. Sometimes, it is unclear who is doing what, and negotiation and flexibility are required. When debriefed well, a game like “Word Pattern” can help a research team to build trust, establishing a shared sense of responsibility for the work of the lab. It also helps the team to feel more comfortable with one another, understanding that mistakes and missteps are a part of working in a team. Additional games to practice these skills include “Group Mirror” or exercises that require two or more people to speak in unison.

Setting the Stage for Applied Improvisation

Principles and techniques of improvisation must not be applied loosely or without careful understanding. The following recommendations may help faculty developers to successfully engage the principles of improvisation and to embrace the ways of thinking associated with its practice in efforts to help faculty and institutions adapt innovatively to changes in HE.

- *Cultivate partnerships with theater departments.* Theater faculty may prove a valuable resource in developing applied improvisation workshops designed to adapt pedagogical strategies of improvisation to new disciplines or to promote collaborative communication among research teams.
- *Seek out local improvisation and theater professionals.* Bring them to your institution to lead workshops on managing change or collaborative leadership. The Applied Improvisation Network (<http://appliedimprov.ning.com> (<http://appliedimprov.ning.com>)) provides a listing of improv professionals worldwide who specialize in bringing the principles and practices of improvisation to new contexts. Many large improvisation organizations (e.g., ComedySportz, iO [formerly ImprovOlympic], The Second City) have dedicated programs for applied improvisation training. However, local improvisation theaters have also increasingly developed applied improvisation training.
- *Anticipate resistance.* As stated previously, faculty and institutions struggle with change. While this shift in thinking and operating carries positive potential, it may ask institutional constituents to push beyond their comfort zones. Because improv is often equated with comedy and because applied improvisation relies on experience and practice through games, faculty might perceive this approach as lacking structure or rigor. Moreover, improvisation games often require participants to accept a level of vulnerability and to abandon hierarchical relationships. For that reason, it is vital to remain grounded in the well-established theory and practice of improvisational theater and to foreground ongoing scholarship that affirms the value of applied improvisation approaches. In addition, educational developers should be aware of and sensitive to the levels of risk required for different improvisation exercises. Begin with low-risk exercises that build trust, comfort, and success. Be prepared for the idea that faculty will opt out of participating but encourage them to stay in the room and even participate as observers or reflectors in the

debrief conversation. As a group develops, the reticent faculty will become more comfortable and see the safety in taking small risks.

- *Commit fully to the mindset.* Improv as an approach has the potential to be transformative to a group or unit within a university. However, it is risky by necessity. Within a space of risk, opportunities exist for colleagues to support one another and for creativity to thrive. Improvisation requires individuals in a group to trust one another at a level that is often not required of colleagues. As such, it requires full commitment from the participants. It cannot be done “halfway.” The greatest yield and transformation comes from true commitment to the ways of thinking and acting. That said, the approach is relatively flexible depending on the task at hand or the group of institutional players. It could be piloted with one committee, group, or project as a way to build trust and capacity for facilitators.
- *Recognize the opportunities...and the limits.* The principles, skills, and elements of improvisational theater have proven valuable when applied in a wide variety of non-theater contexts. However, these principles and skills must be applied thoughtfully and expressed carefully for different audiences. Moreover, the limits of these principles must be acknowledged so as to resist overstating their impact and to avoid applying them dogmatically. For instance, “yes, and...” provides a valuable framework to encourage idea generation, to promote collaboration and trust, and to create a culture of support and mutual respect. Yet, to accept and build on “gifts” is not to say that decision making is forever delayed; in every organization, a time arrives when ideas must be eliminated and decisions made. Improv offers guiding principles and mindsets that must be adapted to particular contexts, rather than strict rules. Educational developers should be careful to promote improvisational ways of thinking as one “tool in the toolbox” for addressing challenges in HE.

Conclusion

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Applied improvisation has great potential as an approach to collaboration, teaching, and problem solving in HE. Future research should carefully investigate what applied improvisation in HE does and in which contexts it proves most valuable. While this review provides a synthesis of literature about the sites in which improv has been anecdotally useful, more empirical research is needed to illustrate the specific learning outcomes best suited for this approach to teaching and organizational development. Additionally, it will be helpful for educational developers to collaborate with colleagues in theater departments or even local theater

professionals to gain skills to help faculty feel comfortable in using these techniques and, perhaps more importantly, engaging in the requisite reflection required to truly reap the benefits of this approach. Ultimately, for applied improv to be a widely used technique, evidence regarding the outcomes of its application is critical.

In sum, to improve the academy, we suggest that educational developers need to *improv* the academy. To support this argument, we have illustrated successful and innovative applications of applied improvisation in the classroom, in response to organizational change, and in research teams. These examples merely provide a launching point for educational developers to create new programs and trainings of value to their institutions. Of course, we do not mean to suggest that improvisational theater training alone will solve all the challenges facing HE or that these are the only requisite skills for success. However, highlighting the many successful applications of improvisation principles and practices across HE, we hope to spark further discussion and research on how applied improvisation proves valuable to the work of educational developers.

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- 1 The four central tenets presented here emerge from the foundational theories presented by Spolin and Johnstone but have been elaborated by many theater directors and educators (e.g., Frost & Yarrow, [2007](#); Halpern, Close, & Johnson, [1994](#); Salinsky & Frances-White, [2008](#)). These core principles are neither exhaustive nor prescriptive, but they represent the most commonly appearing principles across the literature on improvisation
- 2 Online resources include [improvwiki.com \(http://improvwiki.com\)](http://improvwiki.com), [improvencyclopedia.com \(http://improvencyclopedia.com\)](http://improvencyclopedia.com), and [spolingamesonline.com \(http://spolingamesonline.com\)](http://spolingamesonline.com). Many applied improvisation books feature thorough activity descriptions and debriefing questions (e.g., Koppet, [2013](#); Leonard & Yorton, [2015](#); Lowe, [2000](#))

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