

Improv for Destination Imagination

Uses for Improv:

Story development. “Beginning, middle and end,” “introduction, rising action, climax, conclusion,” “establish a routine, break the routine, reestablish a new norm.” These are all ways of looking at the structure of a story. Useful tools for any DI team.

Team work. Improv teams need to work together and trust each other. In professional improv troops the first job on stage is to make the other people on look as smart as possible. “Yes and...”

Performance practice. Improv is a quick way for getting kids used to being on stage and performing. Remember: “Show, don’t tell.”

Some exercises for DI teams:

Circle Stories:

Get the team in a circle, have the kids, and the coach if you wish, tell a story. One person starts the story, and the next person continues it, trying to make it as clear and easy to follow as possible. It can be one word at a time or one phrase at a time. Stress that the story is the star, the story is a goal. More advanced versions of circle stories are circle commercials, circle political speeches, circle poems...

Story lines:

- A. Line them up. Sit in front of them with a pointer, and randomly point to each kid in different orders and for different lengths of time. When the pointer is moved to them they should pick up the story from exact word where the story left off and move it forward as if it was being told by one person.
- B. Line them up. Give them each a word. Simple nouns or verbs are fine. The first person in the line tells the story until he or she says her word. At that moment the next person takes up the story and must continue the story until he says his word. The last person in line must end the story with the last word being the word given to him.

Teaching opportunities: *Story development.* Here is where you can talk about the structure of a story. “Was there a beginning, middle and an end? Who was the protagonist? Were there any unanswered questions? Was it easy to follow? These conversations are an important feature in training them how to write a script for their skit later. **Team work:** Circle stories allow a team to work on their flexibility and cooperation. Remember, the goal for each member of the team to make the other members of the team look good. Telling jokes, changing the flow of the story, “whopping topic changes” or being so rigid that you can’t except or adjust to direction that the rest of the team has taken it are all selfish acts. They hurt the flow of the story and put the person sitting in the next seat on the spot. The goal here is to try to convince them to be flexible thinkers, this flexibility is key to working as a team...

Yes, and...

“Yes, and... “ is a very important concept in improv. When you are creating stories on the spot you should never say no. It makes your partner look crazy. (Actor one: “It is cold in here.” Actor two: “No its not. It’s hot!”) The idea is that you need to always accept what is said and add to it, make it better, more interesting. (Actor one: “It is cold in here!” Actor two: “Yes! I know. Meat lockers need to be cold...Just don’t close the door because we’ll be locked in.” Actor one: “You mean that door?...”)

Yes, and... story line: Have the first person in line suggest an activity (we are going to build a fort...) and have the next person say, “yes” repeat what came before her and then say “and” and add something interesting to the suggestion.

Yes, and... location: Have two performers enter a ‘room’ on stage. The first performer says something about the room and they both begin to show that aspect of the room, the second person says “yes...and” and then adds to the description. The first actor then says “yes...and” and adds yet another thing to the room.

Teaching opportunities: Talk about how interesting and creative their creation was, then ask them “Now, who’s idea was it?” No one can take full credit for this idea. It was all their idea. That is true group decision making. When everyone is listening and throwing out suggestions about how to make it better, and it is impossible at the end to determine who came up with what, because every idea depended on what came before... That is what you are trying to practice here. It won’t happen right away, it may not happen this year, but this is the introduction to that concept. When you practice and promote “yes, and...” you are moving them into that type of group decision making. I just had it happen to my 5th graders this week, we could not keep up with the rich ideas to write them down!

Super Hero Game:

Three people create this scene.

The first person gets on stage and establishes the problem. It can be a big problem or a small one. I refer to this character (in a very non-PC fasion) as the “damsel in distress”. (without knowing it this actor establishes setting, character, and the basic plot.)

The second person then arrives on stage and has three options: 1. He can share in the problem with person one. (The sky is falling on both of them...) 2. He can be the “feeble citizen” who tries to help but fails (he can’t tie shoes either...) or 3. He can be the “evil villain” who caused the problem in the first place.

The third person then arrives on the stage as the super hero with a name and a super power that solves the problem. Again, this can be a typical super power (super strength) or a simple, but important set of powers (mom...with the car, or the band aid...) The scene ends with a big thank you to the super hero...

Teaching opportunities: Team work: This game forces each performer to accept the ideas from other members of the group. It is “yes...and” without actually saying “yes...and”. Watch for not listening—kids come in with a pre-set idea about what they were going to do, without considering or responding to what happened before. Or not accepting the ideas of others—trying to force their idea about how to end it rather than accepting the one presented. **Performance Technique:** “Show, don’t tell.” Make sure they show their feelings, not just say them. Make sure they show their location, not just say it...

Other Games:

Taxi: Set up four chairs, two rows of two. Have the first actor sit in the front and pretend to drive. One of the members of the team yells “taxi” and gets in the cab as a very unique and bold character. The driver then has to adopt the same character as the first actor. It is a fun game that forces kids to play characters out of their comfort zone.

Freeze: Two characters start a scene. At some point a member of the audience says “freeze” and the actors freeze in place. Then the audience member replaces one of the actors and starts a completely different scene that makes sense from that stance. The scene continues until the next team mate says “freeze”

“What are you doing?” Two actors on stage. They both start miming an activity. Then actor one asks, “What are you doing?” and then actor two must respond with any activity except the one he or she is doing. At that point actor one starts doing what actor two said. Actor two then asks “what are you doing?” and the whole process starts over. This is a great game to get kids to think and do different things at once.

Web sites:

Learnimprov.com Lots of games, easy to understand.

improvcyclopedia.org Hundreds of games and other references.

A very good introduction to improv is a tedx talk by a guy named Dave Morris. It is more for adults, but middle and HS teams and coaches will find it interesting. Go to you tube and type in the guy’s name, or go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUO-pWJ0riQ>

Where to see improv:

Some people asked where they can see improv performed.

On TV the best show to see games performed is “Who’s Line Is It Anyway?” It is an adult show so it might have adult jokes, but most of it is appropriate. There is an American version with Jim Carry and a British version. There is also a new version on the CW network. Check out whoselineonline.org for reruns of the old show.

If you are looking for a live performance the best one is “ImprovBoston.” They have a family show each week. It is expensive, but a fun field trip...