

Arts Assessment For Learning

THEATER-3RD GRADE

RESOURCES: IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER

IMPROV ACTIVITY: SLIDE SHOW

SLIDE SHOW

The Slide Show activity that I did with the children is adapted from a more difficult version of the game.

In the “classic” version, one or two narrators tell a story or give a lecture that is improvised based on a suggestion from the audience. The narrators stop periodically to show “slides” that illustrate the story or lecture. The slides are improvised tableaux done by a cast of players who have been standing or sitting in a row on stage. Sometimes the “slides” will be brought to life as mimed “video clips”. The players in the tableaux stay frozen in position until the next slide is called for.

With the children we made the activity easier by keeping the basic form of the game, but limiting the extent of improvisation. The stories that were illustrated by tableaux were four part stories that the children had written. Initially a narrator told each story and stopped at the end of each of the four parts and the children formed a tableau illustrating that part of the story. Children were assigned roles, but what they created was left to the dynamic of the ensemble. As the work developed, we were able to add more tableaux. This was managed by having the teacher break the story into chunks suitable for tableaux work. The stories were written up on chart paper with breaks for tableaux indicated. The shifts between tableaux were done by the children “in character” or if their characters changed from scene to scene, they stayed in the spirit of the story.

The players who created the tableaux sat in a row of chairs upstage, facing the audience. The players sat in neutral positions. As the narrator told the story, they rose up and created the tableaux. Transitions between tableaux were done to a slow count of five beats. This was done to insure safety and to give the players a chance to observe what the other players were doing so their contribution would fit in with the whole group tableaux.

In early rehearsals the players would just rise up and improvise the tableaux, but in time roles were assigned and the tableaux became set. This allowed us to refine the tableaux and organize the transitions between them. We did this so that basic rules of stagecraft would be respected. Children were taught not to upstage themselves or others, broad, clear expression was encouraged. - Whenever possible transitions between scenes were acted out as part of the story.

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Student directors helped with this process. Working collaboratively with their ensemble, the directors were to ensure that everybody could be seen, moved slowly and safely into position, and contributed ideas for tableaux. The creation of the tableaux ultimately became an ensemble project, everyone contributed ideas.

CRITERIA

- Stay in character
- Freeze in a position you can hold.
- Make the action fit the words of the story.
- Make sure your work fits in with the ensemble.
- Make sure you are not upstaging yourself or others.

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IMPROV GAME: PARTS TO A WHOLE

Beginner's version:

Name an object that has many parts, for example a computer, a car, a house. Ask the children to list the parts. Write these down on chart paper.

For example: Computer

Mouse

Keyboard

Mouse pad

Screen

Cable

Invite a child to choose an item from the list and become it on stage. Then invite another child up and add another part. Keep going until the whole computer is made. Each person must be in proper relationship to the other parts. For example, the child playing the keyboard should be in front of the child playing the screen.

NOTES: It helps children, and beginners to first make a list of the parts of the object that will be made. For ELL's having a picture of the object helps, or even the real object. A list for ELL's might contain pictures as well as words.

For more advanced players it is possible to choose more complex objects, or even environments: a playground, a baseball game, the universe. Players can either become objects, people, or animals in the setting. The players can name what they are, or this can be left up to the audience or the other players to guess.

How does this game reinforce the three rules of improv?

Always say "yes" / Say the first thing that comes into your head: All suggestions are accepted when making lists.

Always make your partner look good: All embodiments of the objects are accepted. Players work in relationship to one another. Players can work in tandem to create parts of the object or environment.

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IMPROV GAME: THANK YOU STATUE

One player stands before the audience and assumes a pose. A second player enters and assumes a pose that somehow connects to what the first person has done. A third player enters, taps one of the two on the shoulder and says, "Thank you, statue." That player leaves. The third player takes their place and assumes a different pose, changing the nature of the scene.

For example: The first player enters and strikes a pose as if at bat in a baseball game. The second player enters and poses as the pitcher. The third player enters, taps out the pitcher, saying, "Thank you, statue." The third player assumes a terrified pose as if the first player were about to strike him with the bat.

The game continues with players entering and exiting, creating new tableaux.

NOTES: With children this game becomes all about battle scenes, or failing that, rock stars. I let this go on for a little while to let the children get familiar with the game, then forbid the use of these topics. And of course, no bathroom or inappropriate topics or touching.

It helps the children's creativity and understanding of the game if after each pose the audience discusses what the player or players might be doing. This involves inference skills. I tell the children that what the audience assumes might not be what they had in mind at all. That's OK. It doesn't mean there is anything lacking in their pose, or that the audience is "guessing" wrong, the game is about imagining all the different scenes that are possible.

Make sure the scenes are staged so that the audience can see the players. I find it best to have the audience seated proscenium style rather than in a circle.

An extension of this game would be to add dialogue to the tableaux. An even further extension is to take the scene into action, then periodically freeze it to change the tableau.

How does this game reinforce the three rules of improv?

Always say "yes": Accept all the possible interpretations of your pose, accept everything the new partners offer. Don't break character and say, "That's not what I was doing!"

Always make your partner look good: Build off your partner's position.

Say the first thing that comes into your head: Any position is good enough to start with, sometimes even in continuing the game.

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IMPROV GAME: FOUR PART STORY

There are many games, techniques, or formats for building stories. Most books dealing with improv or storytelling with children will list a few. I like this one found in *Improv for Actors* by Dan Diggles, an excellent book on using improv in the classroom. I like it because it contains the basic structure of a play.

The four parts of the story are:

1. **The Exposition:** What life is like every day
2. **The Inciting Incident:** What makes today different from every other day? Something happens that causes a problem.
3. **The Resolution:** What happens next? How is the problem solved?
4. **The Denouement:** What is life like every day after the Resolution?

There are many ways to help children build the capacity to make four part stories.

- Have chart paper with the four parts written out with sentence stems and generous spacing in between parts.
 - The exposition: Once there was a child. Every day he/she liked to.....
 - The inciting Incident: But one day.....
 - The Resolution: So he/she.....
 - The Denouement: Now every day.....
- This activity can be modeled in a mini-lesson, then the children can work in small teams to create their own stories. Forms can be given to them to write on. The stories are then shared.
- The structure can be approached one or two steps at a time. This can be done as solo work, or using a Turn and Talk format (two person partner work).
- The activity can be done purely as improv. Teams of four can come up and each child can create one part of the story. This can also be done in a circle, new stories being created every fourth child.

NOTE: Children often err by using a negating event in the second step. For Example: Once there was a girl who liked to eat ice cream. But one day she didn't. While sometimes this can lead to a good story, dramatically it lacks substance, eventfulness. I warn the kids away from this. Something must *happen* in the second step that causes a problem. Did the girl get deathly sick? Did creatures from outer space come and eat all the ice cream?

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IMPROVISATION: BIBLIOGRAPHY

There are several books which might be useful to a teacher seeking to implement an improve unit.

The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual,

Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh, Comedy Council of Nicea LLC, 2013.

A great book on improv, but will mainly give you an understanding of how improve works as an adult. Great for building your own background knowledge, may be directly applicable for older students, but a difficult stretch for younger students.

Improv for Actors,

Dan Diggles, Allworth Press, 2004.

An excellent book on improv for the classroom. The book is written as a series of lesson plans. Instructions for games are included, but best of all a rationale is given for each of the games and the sequence of lessons. Though the book is written with an adult class in mind, the work is readily adaptable to younger children.

Training to Imagine,

Kat Koppet, Stylus Publishing, 2013.

An excellent list of games, descriptions of how to play them, and a way to “debrief” or reflect on the games after playing. A thoughtful dissection of the principles of improv is given. Another book written for adults, but the principles are applicable for children.

In addition to the books I can't stress enough the importance of actually doing improv yourself before you teach it to the children. Go see improv in action, but most important, take classes, study it as an art form. You'll gain an insight into how it works, how it feels, that no book can give you.