

# IMPROVing Social Skills: Using Improv Games to Boost Social-Emotional Learning

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## I need your help!

1. I need two (or three) volunteers
2. I need a location
3. I need an occupation



## Welcome to Improv!

Brief Introduction to who I am...

The Wolverine and the Water Buffalo

Why I Don't Have a Date to the Dance!



## What is Improv?

Improv (Impro) is a shorthand for Improvisational Theatre

Most or all of what is performed is unplanned and unscripted: creation occurs spontaneously from the performers (and sometimes the audience)

As a practice, dates back to Italy (the Atellan Farce) in 390 BCE but modern roots are in Chicago (Second City) and Canada (Keith Johnstone's *Theatresports*)

John Dewey wrote a psychology/education paper on using theatre games to "calm and engage the overactive young mind" in 1916

Two main types: shortform and longform



## Why is Improv good for gifted kids?

- Highly verbal
- Highly creative
- Fast-paced and No time-limit
- Firm external structure but lots of space for creativity
- Self-created/directed
- Natural practice of Executive Functioning (EF) skills



## Executive Functioning (EF)

Can you self-regulate? So many gifted kids struggle with these skills!

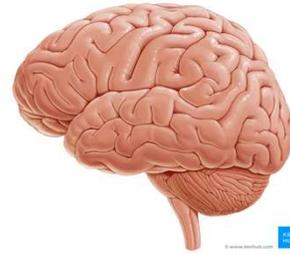
- 1) Inhibit behavior    2) Make a plan    3) Stay focused    4) Follow directions
- 5) "Read the room"    6) Manage your time    7) Follow through    8) Listen

But learning these skills is HARD! And really not that fun. So what's the point?!

"You can't improvise if you haven't been engaged in learning, practice, guidance, discipline—a lot of hard work. There's a myth about creativity as magic. It's not. It comes from sustained focus."

- J. Bharucha (Michael Jordan Myth)

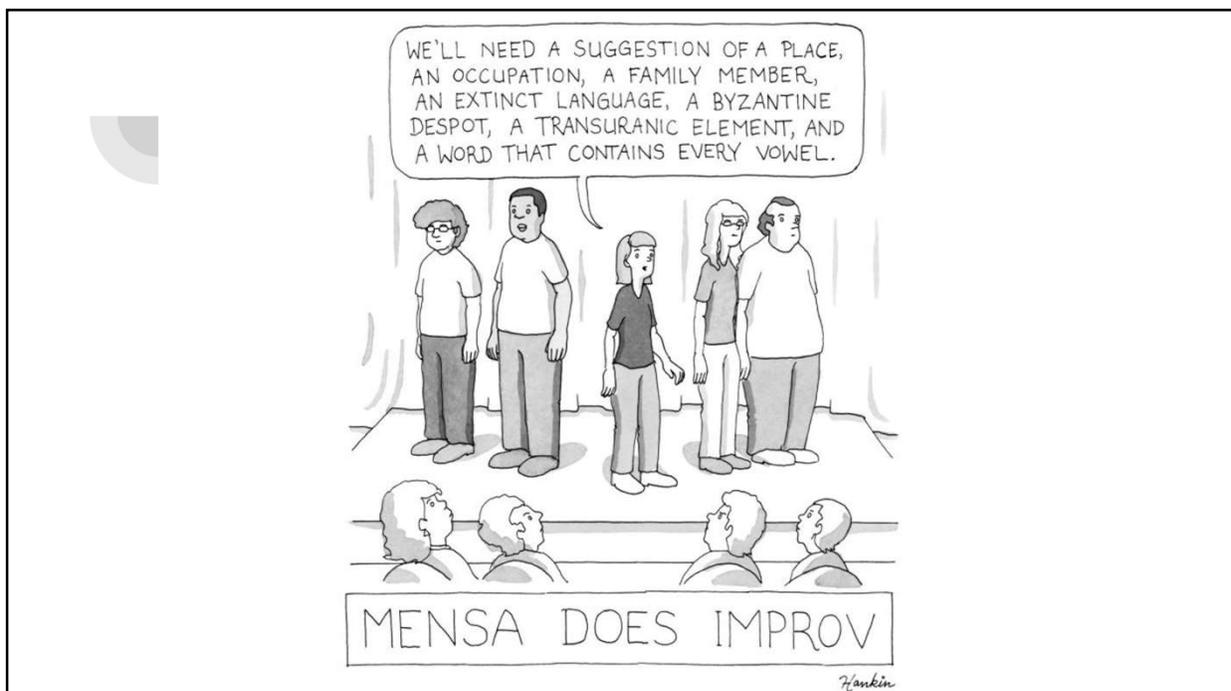
## The Brain



Limb and Braun (2008) - during improvisation exercises, the whole brain lights up

Dissociation in the prefrontal cortex (PFC):

1. Increased activity in the medial area: "internally motivated behavior" and "autobiographical narrative,"
  2. Reduced activity in lateral areas: "monitoring, judging, correcting behavior." Dissociation might suggest suspension of conscious control, enabling freer, more spontaneous thoughts and actions.
- Exposure to these skills allows the brain to access the state of creative flow more easily





## Addition to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

- Many schools are emphasizing SEL as a part of their curricula
- Off-the-shelf kits don't necessarily fit the unique needs of gifted students
- Improv supports all of the five core competencies of SEL (<https://casel.org/>)
  - Self-Awareness
  - Self-Management
  - Social Awareness
  - Relationship Skills
  - Responsible Decision-Making



## Why use Improv to teach social-emotional skills?

The Mantra changes mindset in all areas of SEL, but we will focus on three:

Social Skills (Social Awareness)

Resiliency (Self-Management)

Focus (Self-Awareness)

## The Mantra



## Social Skills (Social Awareness)

Theatre is inherently social - communicating with and listening/responding to others

Organic - content is student-created so feels more authentic

Collaborating with others - makes everyone better (the goal is to improve others)

Immediate feedback/response

Building confidence - generalizes skills

Perspective taking

Fun!



## Resiliency (Self-Management)

Supportive environment

Failure is built in, expected, and fast-moving

Dealing with perfectionism (self and others)

“There are no mistakes, only opportunities.” - Tina Fey

Building trust in self and others

It's not about being the best. There is no best.



## Need proof?

There are so many complications of Imrpov errors online!

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzGQJZW2\\_80](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzGQJZW2_80)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c\\_1Mi6VYBBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_1Mi6VYBBE)



What do they all have in common?

LAUGHTER!!!!



## Focus (Self-Awareness)

Fast-paced situations - at the gifted pace

Need to slow the mind down

Constantly shifting

What are the rules? What am I required to do/not do?

Taking cues from others - social, verbal, emotional, etc.

When you're not in the scene



## Quote

“Well, [life is] the greatest improvisation of all. With no script. No idea what's going to happen, often with people places you have never seen before. And you are not in control. So say ‘yes.’ And if you're lucky, you'll find people who will say ‘yes’ back.”

- Stephen Colbert





## Examples in Popular Culture

Big Bang Theory / New Girl / Always Sunny in Philadelphia / 30 Rock / The Office

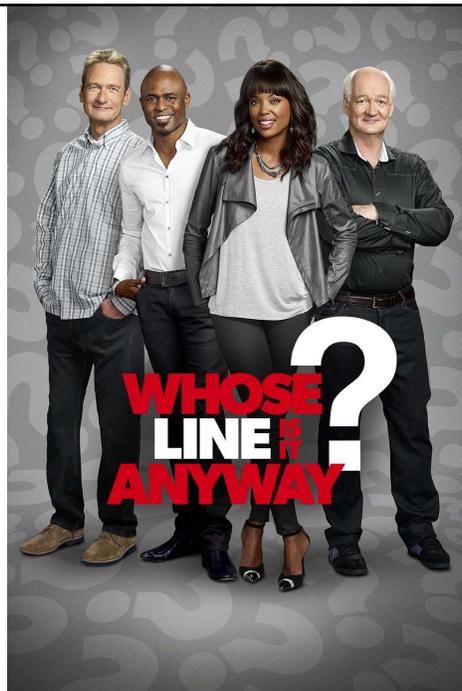
Curb Your Enthusiasm / Louie

This is Spinal Tap / Best in Show (anything by Christopher Guest)

Wild N' Out (Nick Cannon)

Saturday Night Live

And, of course...





## So, you want to do Improv

Ground Rules are vital

1. Basics on the document that will be emailed to you
2. Think about your students, your school, your parents, etc.

Process afterwards

1. What worked? What didn't?
2. **The key to making this intentionally transformative – exposure vs. skill-building**
3. Plan time for processing/feedback (5 minutes?)



## “Rules” of Improv

1. Listen
2. Agree and Add
3. Teamwork
4. Don't Block
5. Focus on the Relationship
6. Initiation
7. Point of View, Opinion and Intention
8. Stay in Character
9. Don't Ask (too many) Questions
10. Make Active Choices

(Goodman, 2008)

## The Space

Want the participants to sit in a half-circle around a performance area

The "stage" needs to be seen by all

Chairs

Props?



## Sample Activities



Thank you...erm....I haven't actually prepared anything.



## Park Bench

What you need: two chairs next to each other

Rules: One person is seated (target) and one person (player) has one minute to one line that would reasonably get a stranger to move away from you if you were both seated on a bench

All of the players go in order around the circle

Judgment calls on whether the target would move - differences of opinion, etc. (Group is allowed to vote)

Process questions: what is the point of this game? What makes people uncomfortable?  
How can you tell that they are uncomfortable?



## Party Quirks

What you need: 3-5 people and a door

Rules: The party host (usually I start in this role) sets up a party while the guests (3-4 people) leave the room to come up with recognizable identities. They enter the room one at a time and act in character, giving clues so the host can guess (without being obvious)

Note: You can start with pre-fab identities (Harry Potter, Pikachu, Sponebob) until the students get the hang of it. You can move into quirks as they master the game (fears, occupations, patterns of interaction, etc.)

Each "party" should last about five minutes, then switch up the roles

Process: How did you give hints? How could you tell who was who?



## Freeze!

What you need: Two people to start. Someone else to be director

Rules: Two people are given a scene based on suggestions from the audience (often Setting and Profession). They begin the scene and continue until the facilitator says "Freeze!" Then a person is replaced and the new actor takes the scene in a new direction. The facilitator can add in characters (and props) as well.

Processing: Executive Function skills, creativity, adaptability, listening



## But what about Introverts?!





## But/Then...

- A group storytelling game
- Someone starts the story with a sentence of their choosing (i.e., "Once upon a time, there was a school in Kentucky...")
- The next person must add something to the story by first using BUT as a conjunction and then adding a sentence (i.e., "but the school was not what it seemed from the outside.")
- The next person must add something different but (at least somewhat) related to the story by first using THEN as a conjunction and then adding another sentence (i.e., "then the principal decided to share their story with the world on CNN.")
- The story goes, following the But/Then rules until the story stops making sense or gets stale



## World's Worst

What you need: A list of topics (hidden from the students)

This is a game for all members of the group.

To play: The facilitator gives a topic sentence. "Give us examples of the world's worst... restaurant (or prom-posal, movie trailer, substitute teacher, sentence you'd hear from an American tourist, etc.)." The students have to come up with sentences/actions that demonstrate that topic. The scenes can be solo or in groups. You can't repeat ideas.

Process: This game is more advanced because there is very little guidance and the students have to come up with the content on their own. You can talk about what makes things funny, what differences of opinion exist within the group, etc.

## 100 ways to say "Hello"

- A key social skill is understanding the social meanings of words – Prosody (stress and intonation of language)
- Different words have different meanings in different situations (fire! Vs. fire) and with different tones ("alright?" vs. "Alright!!")
- Pick a word. (i.e., Hello) and go around in a circle saying the word in as many different ways as possible
- You can have the group try to name/guess the intonation (i.e., angry, flirty, sick, bored)





## More Resources

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyxHujdRIpk> (TEDx LSSU talk on Improv)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-R4NT0YuqY> (TEDx Melbourne University talk on how Improv helps in all situations)



## Questions?

Fun fact, that's also an Improv game (you can only speak in questions to each other)

(Also potentially good for introverts.)

For more questions about the psychotherapeutic work I do (or to have me come to your school/office and do a demonstration), please email me at [drmattzakreski@gmail.com](mailto:drmattzakreski@gmail.com)



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