

# Improvisation: Five Approaches

By Karen Erickson

**What is improvisation?** And what is the best way to introduce and use it in our classrooms? So many of us engage students in improvisation without considering the many variations of improvisational drama work available to us, or how tailoring the type of improvisation to our needs can enhance our teaching practice.

Let me start by defining what I mean by improvisation.

- **Improvisation:** to act without a predetermined text. An improvisational approach is the opposite of working with a written script where lines have been set and actors memorize the dialogue as written.

Within this basic definition, there are different approaches to designing and delivering improvisation that serve different purposes. Successfully facilitating each approach requires a different process and often different activities. Each of the five approaches to improvisation has an important place in the development of actors and performance material. A strong drama program finds ways to incorporate all of these approaches in the curriculum, giving students the opportunity to work with improvisation in many different formats. Learning the basics of these approaches allows a teacher to draw upon a range of experiences and methods, adapting improvisation techniques to the purpose at hand, the developmental level of the actors, and to reaching a predetermined outcome.

**The Five Distinctive Approaches to and uses of Improvisation are...**

## **Basic Performance Improvisation**

This type of improvisation is used to introduce improvisation to students, or to create comedy sketches which will be performed for a formal or informal audience. Actors might take suggestions from the audience to build humorous or (vary rarely) serious scenes on the spot. In this form, actors learn rules for interacting with an ensemble and a process for creating short sketches that requires timing, listening, and quick thinking. Chicago's Second City is a good example of this type of improvisation. A television show called, "Who's Line Is It Anyway?" also was able to showcase this type of improvisation. Basic Performance Improvisation is for the rehearsal, polishing, and development of theatrical sketch performance.

## **Devised Theater**

This type of improvisation is used to create longer works of original theater. This work can be used for classroom sharing or can grow into works for performance in front of an audience. Actors are guided step-by-step through the process of creating more fully developed and usually more thorough dramatic pieces or full length plays, sometimes even utilizing sets, lights, costumes, etc. Of course, devised work can stop at the classroom level instead of growing into a full production – the choice is up to the leader and the actors. The Albany Park Theatre Project in Chicago has found great success in this form.

## **Applied Theater**

This type of improvisation is not focused on entertainment, but rather facilitates the exploration of an idea, theme, conflict, or question by a group of people. The purpose is communication among the participants. People who are trained or untrained in the arts can participate in applied theater, and it happens in a variety of community settings. Augusta Boal's work (Forum Theater, Legislative Theater, etc.) is exemplary of this form. Other examples include psychodrama and sociodrama.

## **Drama in the Classroom (Creative Drama)**

Whenever students are acting a story without a script, or making up their own stories based on history, science, or a favorite book, they are improvising. Teachers who engage students in drama in the classroom without having students memorize a set script are already teaching improvisation. This is a strong choice for all ages but a necessary one for drama work with the very young. This approach uses very few performance "rules" as performance is not the usual goal. If performance becomes a goal, drama in the classroom often transforms into Basic Improvisation or Devised Theater.

## **Improvisation as Scripted Theater Rehearsal**

This type of improvisation is used by stage directors to illuminate a character's backstory or the hidden subtext in a script. This improvisational technique can help students dig deeper into their character traits and motivations, understand the impact of setting and environment, uncover the meaning of plot points, or build relationships among characters in a play. It is also a method of building skills in actors that might be needed to strengthen the production, including listening, spontaneity, and timing. This type of improvisation is also used to assist in the professional training and development of actors. Viola Spolin's work was intended for this purpose.

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Each of these approaches can evolve into and inform any of the others. The lines between the approaches are not always crystal clear. This "messiness" is acceptable as theater continues to be an evolving art form that sprang thousands of years ago from improvisation.

I recently directed Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and learned in my research that the show was probably produced and developed through improvisation. Though it was rehearsed, the actors used a great deal of improvisation even in the performance. Later the script was generated by actor's recalling what they had created. Because so much was created on the spot, there are places in the script where scenes seem to be missing and other scenes added that do not connect to the plot structure. When I directed it, I had the documented script but I used improvisation myself to assist the actors in building skills through improvisational "games" and through improvising devised scenes of their own to dig deeper into understanding the text. I find that once the forms are understood, it is easy to move between and among them.

There is a place for each of these five approaches to exist in our work because they all support the work of the developing or the accomplished artist. In my work as an educator and director, I have developed improvisational games (Level I) for actors to learn skills or to prepare for short comic/serious sketches; written short stories for actors to improvise to create drama in the classroom (Level II); and created full

units using applied and devised improvisational techniques. In rehearsals of scripted material, I use improvisational games and rehearsal improvisation to fine tune and polish the work of the actors.

Students in a well-rounded drama program should be exposed to all of these improvisational approaches. I hope the material you find at ***One Stop Drama Shop*** will assist you in having the right tool ready for the type of improvisational approach you need at any given time.

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