

One Way to Create Educational Games

Popular abstract: Improv games, which are used to train actors in how to do improvisational theatre, may be used to train other professions as well. The games assist in the development of simple skills and also give context for the skills' use. The director chooses a series of these quick and simple games, tailoring the games to the already existing skills of the students. The skills built through the games may assist with further exercises, which may vary widely depending on the field in which they are taught. Instructions on how to create improv games, and hazards to avoid, are also included, should a teacher or director decide to create some games.

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Academics often make theoretical connections between their own fields, such as sociology, and theatre studies (Goffman 1979, 124). So why not take more than theoretical inspiration and take theatre training methods as well? Improv games teach how to socialize better through practicing aspects such as talking, manners, observing or listening, without eliminating context (Spolin 1963). As a training method, improv games were first designated as such by Viola Spolin, but she credits Neva Boyd for their actual origin (ix). Spolin has expounded upon improv games, but she has mostly explored it from the field of theatre studies.

Improv games, at least the simple ones, are not improvised theatre like *Commedia dell'arte* or the *Atellan Farces*. Instead, they are a type of short exercises meant to build the actor's skills towards such roles (Spolin 1963, 5). While these games are not meant to be humorous, laughter may arise (Johnstone 1979, 31). Instead of dwelling on the humor, each exercise's focus is on the situation. Despite seeming simple, improvisation is actually very difficult to do well. Society trains us to behave in certain ways, and it can be very difficult to break that barrier (Goffman 1973, 120). Goffman examines these massive amounts of contextual information as frames, which is a shortened version of frameworks (Goffman 1979, 10-11). Thus, a person's behavior, clothes, the setting and the audience can all provide context for interpretation. For example, you see someone standing perfectly straight and dressed in a business suit. That is not enough information to frame the situation. Where is this person and what is happening around them? The interpretations may vary greatly depending on whether you viewed the person in a business meeting or on stage in a play (Goffman 1979, 133, 247).

It is important to note that, while both roles are acted, the former is usually considered to be more

serious in its potential consequences (Goffman 1973, 17). Usually people find one or the other more difficult. Improvising well involves cultivating a range of skills to overcome this sort of difficulty (Berger 2009, 118). When I say skills, I use the word in its broadest definition, including a range of teachable behaviors as well as how to accomplish tasks. These skills are taught together, for acting does not lend itself to isolating individual skills. A listing of these skills include: body acting, voice control, storytelling, confidence, observation, memory, teamwork, problem-solving, cultural knowledge and many more that I have not listed. You may even recognize that a few of these are useful to fields beyond acting.

Skills take time to learn. Destin Sandlin (2015), from the *YouTube* channel "Smarter Every Day," was confronted with the task of riding a bicycle, but this was no ordinary bike. This bike turned left when you steered it right and vice versa. It took him months to learn how to ride this bike. What he learned was that just knowing how to do something does not equal understanding how to it. It takes time to build that knowledge into understanding. He even goes so far as to state that the same problem would be encountered by anyone else who tried to ride that bike, something that was proved true when he took his bike on a speaking tour. Similarly, the skills taught by improv games rely on understanding, rather than knowledge. It is perfectly valid for someone to come away from a session of improv games claiming not to have learned anything. Sometimes the game provides only knowledge, and it needs to be played repeatedly in order to turn that knowledge into skills.

Improv games are only games in the loosest sense of the word; often there are no winners. The line between games and exercises is neither well defined nor particularly relevant. Improv games consist of simple rules along with an end condition. Because it is rare for an improv game to last more than ten

minutes, usually a series of games are run. By extension, improv games are not live-action role-playing games (larps), for a larp always involves playing a role. The closest relative to improv games is found in jeepform, but even it is different in that with jeepform, generally the designer creates the characters, while in improv games that job is given to the players (Wrigstad 2008, 12). Playing a character only occasionally appears in improv games because they focus on the skills and personality behind the creation of a role for that particular game. That said, improv games provide a great way to introduce new players to larping. Another feature of improv games is that they always teach something. Improv games are usually auteur-oriented, which means that there is no audience, only the actors and the director, but even this rule is often ignored (Berger 2009, 130). Spolin wrote *Improvisation for the Theater* and many other books exist, but, because of their popularity, it is easy to search the web for sites listing improv games.

These searches inspired me to try creating my own improv game. In the game *Guess Who*, players take turns silently acting out a role while the rest of the group tries to madly guess who they're pretending to be. The game continues either until the role is guessed or the players are stumped. When playing for the first time, a lot of players will choose to impersonate celebrities. How would you try to act like one of those people? The next time you watch people, keep that in mind. What did you get right? What did you get wrong? How would you revise your acting? On the other side, how would you recognize the differences if they were shown to you? *Guess Who* also teaches players to pay attention to facial expressions and body language, while ignoring other social indicators such as fashion. The game works best if the actor collaborates with the audience, shows them some piece of shared cultural understanding which is indicative of the character he or she is trying to portray. *Guess Who* can be used to encourage players to try characters they might not otherwise attempt (Johnstone 1979, 69). I created the game, but was inspired by the famous Russian director Stanislavsky and other improv games. There are many games similar to *Guess Who*, and reading them can provide ideas about how to change the game.

Spolin (1963, 255) notes that most people begin the same, but become more subtle as they gain experience, and more accurate depictions usually communicate better. After a while, they should be encouraged to attempt more general types of people. Think for a moment about children behave, or

elderly people, drunkards, or even tourists. It may be made more difficult by getting more specific or possibly merging the stereotypes. Spolin was, among other things, a theatre director.

Just like classrooms usually involve teachers, improv games usually involve a director. Spolin occasionally refers to the role by connecting the two terms (Spolin 1963, 380). Directors are useful people, for they watch over the entire group (323). This overview lets them see if the rules were described sufficiently, or if someone needs to be pulled aside and given individual assistance. They may suggest variant rules to adjust games to the players' skill levels. It is one of the jobs of the directors to judge whether a particular game fits with a particular group of players. When a game has been mastered, a director removes it from the rotation and substitutes another game, but even experienced actors can sometimes benefit from relearning the basics (Atkins 1994, xv). If the aforementioned claim to not having learned anything comes up several times, perhaps the director needs to revisit his or her choice of games, as sometimes the lesson has already been learned.

The director is also in charge of keeping people in line. Humor can be fun, but it can also mask a sense of discomfort. Spolin writes about how other emotions, like apathy, can be used to hide discomfort (1963, 280). It takes a certain level of diplomacy to approach someone who exhibits humor, or indeed any other sign of unease. It may be, if the person is very uncomfortable, that they be allowed to leave without consequences.

I would like to take issue with a claim, made by Spolin, that creativity increases when people live in the moment (1963, 285). They are actually more likely to fall back on established patterns when behaving that way. Proof of my claim can be found in the name of the game called *Genre/Style Change* (Atkins 1994, 112). Genres are established patterns that emerge from a community, and they are easy shortcuts to create or modify stories. Players can be creative, but, in my experience, creativity most often occurs between games because that is when most people engage in thoughtful reflection. I say most often because the human mind is an amazing and unpredictable thing. The important thing to realize is that creativity is a skill like any other, and it improves with practice.

Improv games appear so simple, it may seem that practically anyone can design them, but there are hazards to watch out for. Improv games do not include any randomness in the form of dice or cards used in determining outcomes, an effect which Costikyan refers to as randomness (2013, 58). The

effects of these sorts of rules often exist in opposition to player skill (Elias, Garfield and Gutscherra 2012, 152). What would the game of Guess Who teach if you had to roll dice every time you wanted to make a guess? The game would devolve into chance, rather than being about acting. There are still elements of *player* uncertainty, because you never know what people will do (Costikyan 2013, 32).

Games will always end, but the players need the freedom to explore any idea that takes them towards that ending (Spolin 1963, 7). While certain games may ignore developing characters, others may focus on it. The key to making such a game is in how you shape the ending. It should be as uncomplicated as possible, and be shaped by the lesson which you desire to convey.

If I were to play Spolin's (1963, 109) *Who Game* with you, we would be involved in a relationship, but the nature of that relationship is only known to me. You must guess what the relationship and respond by acting as that type of character. Obviously, this could be over in seconds, or it could take several minutes, especially if you guess incorrectly. The director must watch both players closely in order to figure out whether or not the game is over.

For students who are experienced with both improv games and also learning their professed vocations, improv games may contribute to other exercises. For example, actors may actually put on a play (Spolin 1963, 319). Border guards are taught how to interrogate travelers. How much better would they be if they had practiced, through improv games, observing people and evaluating their behavior?

For a nursing class you could simulate patient diagnosis and triage. It would assist dealing with inebriated or unruly patients. All that would be needed is an actor or live action role-player to play the patient. It is the challenge of the students to react appropriately, regardless of the behavior of the patient. The skills of observation and cultural understanding developed through improv games combine well with the more practical understanding of what to do with a patient. Any extra details, such as pulse, temperature and internal conditions, may be provided by the director through side coaching. Because only the director and the patient know what problem the students will have to deal with, this scenario may also function as a test (Spolin 1963, 320). The director will likely downplay players' creativity to in order to focus on the task at hand, whatever it may be, but that doesn't mean that creativity should be discouraged entirely (20).

The ultimate goal of improv games is to teach. As any game designer can tell you, even the simplest of games can teach something, but there are flaws within this claim. Sometimes the lesson has already been learned. Sometimes the lesson is irrelevant to the players' lives. Other times the game provides only knowledge, and it needs to be played repeatedly in order to turn into understanding. Picking the games to be run is the director's job, and they all depend on the profession being taught. For actors this can manifest as teaching how to improvise, but other fields may use improv games towards other ends.

What I like about improv games because they are quick to play and teach and players can engage them without preparation. Furthermore, improv games can also help people who have very little interest in acting because they assist with the development of a broad range of social skills. Just because improv games have proven successful does not mean that they are the only way to shape an educational game. There are far too many educational games to make that claim. Nonetheless, they have accumulated decades of use in theatre schools and acting troupes by providing the skills necessary for good acting. Those same skills are often useful, but also often overlooked, by other more technically oriented education programs. It is time for those disciplines to create closer ties with their theatre schools.

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BIO

Graham MacLean is an independent academic interested in all sorts of analog (non-computerized) games, including ones relating to theatre. MacLean is also a game designer, proprietor of Mad Unkie Games and possesses a Masters in Library and Information Science. An attempt at a PhD, focusing on game studies, was made, but after five years he burnt out and decided to instead pursue a career using his graphic design skills.