

Improvisation in the Classroom

Improvisation as a Teaching Strategy

According to Berk and Trieber (2009), improvisation can be designed for students to:

1. build trust
2. foster teamwork and better brainstorming
3. improve communication and presentation skills
4. promote creative problem solving
5. respond quickly and decisively to unanticipated challenges
6. think on their feet and recognize opportunities as they arise
7. increase their comfort level with change and willingness to take risks
8. manage change and promote a supportive culture.

Improvisation will also:

9. stimulate emotions
10. attract attention
11. encourage meaning making
12. create lasting memories and lessons learned.

What is improv?

Improvisation is performing without a script. It is about being spontaneous. To some degree, it is an acquired skill that takes preparation and practice. Improv is often funny, but it doesn't have to be. Instead, improv is about being imaginative and taking the unexpected and doing something unexpected with it (Kelly 2012).

Why Use Improvisation in the Classroom?

13. It is consistent with the characteristics of the current generation, the Millennials. These characteristics include:
 - a. a preference for inductive discovery
 - b. intuitive visual communicators
 - c. crave social face-to-face interaction
 - d. are emotionally open
 - e. respond quickly and expect rapid responses
 - f. quickly task switch
14. It taps into multiple and emotional intelligences because it requires active discovery, analysis, interpretation, problem-solving, memory, musical creation, physical activity, and the emotions of the self and others.
15. It fosters collaborative learning because it encompasses the five elements: positive interdependence, individual accountability, face-to-face interaction, appropriate use of collaborative skills, and group processing.
16. It promotes deep learning because improvisation satisfies four criteria: motivational context, learner activity, interaction with others, and a well-structured knowledge base.

Improvisation is especially useful in the college classroom because it is particularly effective with problem-based material. One of the goals of improvisation is to 'solve a problem'. It also requires students to focus on the problem and not the individuals addressing the problem because they are 'in the moment' at all times.

Seven Principles of Improvisation (Berk & Trieber, 2009; Riveire, 2006)

For improvisation to be an effective teaching tool, fear and anxiety must be eliminated. The following principles together create an encouraging environment.

1. **Trust** – for students to be successful and productive, they need to trust their classmates. With trust comes the understanding that they will not be berated or belittled while they are performing. In other words, the classroom must be a safe environment.
2. **Acceptance** – students must be willing to accept new ideas in order to explore new possibilities. Each student is responsible for contributing to and supporting the activity. Especially during brainstorming because collaboration can lead to innovative solutions.
3. **Attentive Listening** – students must be aware of their partners/teams to increase understanding of each other and facilitate effective communication.
4. **Spontaneity** – improvisation is created in the moment without the opportunity to revise. The performers and audience should suspend critical judgment about the performance. Performers do the best they can under the circumstances.
5. **Storytelling** – improvisation allows students to develop the ability to create a collaborative narrative that connects dialogue through a story.
6. **Nonverbal Communication** – performers should utilize facial expressions and body language to help communicate attitude, character, and trustworthiness.
7. **Warm-ups** – activities that help students get into the improvisation mindset by developing a safe environment and encouraging exploration.

A good way to help build a creative and encouraging environment is to establish ground rules of behavior and critiquing. The instructor must model the ground rules and hold everyone responsible for maintaining the standard.

The Rules of Improvisation

The following rules come from Tina Fey's book, *Bossypants* as cited in Kelly 2012.

Rule 1: Agree and say 'yes' – this means that you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. It reminds you to respect what your partner has created and start from an open-minded place.

Rule 2: Not only say 'yes', say 'yes and' – you are supposed to agree and add something of your own to the scene. It is your responsibility to contribute to the scene or discussion.

Rule 3: Make statements - making statements in improv provides a direction that everyone else can follow. Statements serve as the roadmap not the final destination. It is a nice way of saying “don't ask questions all the time”. Instead, be part of the solution and not the problem.

Rule 4: There are no mistakes, only opportunities – you listen, react, and create something new out of everything that is said. If someone misinterprets an action you take, then just go with it. You don't want to stop to explain what you were really doing. Improv is about accepting and moving on not looking back or placing blame. Therefore, there are no mistakes, only happy accidents.

References

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