

Enhancing Teaching, Adaptability and Presentation Skills Through Improvisational Theater

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ABSTRACT

Improvisational theater, creative role-playing and open-ended scenarios are increasingly being used as ways to emphasize the importance of combining planning with flexibility and evolution to respond to changes in context. These skills and capabilities are extremely valuable in teaching, especially for strengthening communication and interpersonal skills, as well as the capacity for critical thinking and problem solving. Further, this combination of planning with flexibility is also a major theme of agile software development and a number of other problem-solving domains, and in the collaborative development of intellectual property in technical areas. With improvisation, the plan becomes less of a fixed framework, and more of a guideline. In software engineering, it becomes a mutable structure on which to hang goals and objectives, progress, processes, artifacts, and properties. In this submission, we explore the ramifications of this approach.

Keywords: improvisational theater, teaching, presentation skills, flexibility

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching well is extraordinarily difficult. It requires solid knowledge of the subject matter and its pedagogy, attention to the needs and diverse learning styles of students, and a combination of expository and performance

skills. When the mission includes teaching skills such as critical thinking, context awareness, and flexibility, the teacher's task can seem daunting at best. While skills should never replace required knowledge, interactive techniques such as role-playing or brainstorming can be infused into a course to develop skills.

In this paper, I argue that, with the appropriate investment of time and effort, *improvisational theater* can deliver solid results, not only in the class, but also in the education of teachers, and that the resulting skills and capabilities are transferable to a wide range of intellectual fields and activities. Not only is this approach a complement to education technology, but it can be as professionally useful for scientists, engineers and information and technology specialists as it is for teachers.

Section 2 looks at improvisational theater and discusses current uses, and Section 3 surveys its application, broadly speaking, across a number of areas. Section 4 briefly discusses my personal experience with improvisation, and Section 5 gives the conclusions.

2. IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER

Improvisational theater [12,22,25], in the restricted sense considered here, begins with two or more individuals being given a theme, and after some discussion of scene, character and a narrative structure, acting out an instance of the theme in front of an audience—often the other members of the theater group. (Alternatively, the characters may be described, and the theme left somewhat open.) Frequently, multiple pairs or teams will be given this same assignment, which then (informatively and often delightfully) plays out in a variety of contexts. In a teaching context, this will be combined with exploration of tools and skills, such as sense memory or posture and movement, and possibly a general or specific critique. (When improvisation involves experienced teams of actors, there may be a number of agreed-on contexts and characters, and the discussion may be very brief indeed.)

Improvisation as considered here is not just role-playing, which has no audience and in which the characters have little or no depth. Nor is the most pedagogically useful form based on comedy skits or stand-up comedy, although dramatic improvisation can also be great fun and sometimes blindingly funny. Most such comedy skits are less about character and motivation, and more about common irritations, wordplay or the juxtaposition of stereotypes.

Experience in improvisation has many benefits [16,24].

- Practice in creating an initial plan focuses attention on abstraction, isolating key issues, and making provisional decisions.
- Unfolding and even changing that initial plan or design in response to interaction or even an intervention (perhaps planned by the instructor) develops situational awareness, mental flexibility, quick intellectual and emotional reactions, and adaptability. It also increases ability and comfort with verbal and non-verbal communication, situation and context awareness, and interpersonal skills. Ideally, it also may dispose participants considering a problem to think of other stakeholders, and their possible interests and

views, leading to more robust problem analysis in a variety of domains.

- Watching the variety of scenes evolving from a single scenario, and developing a scene from original plans, inculcates situation analysis and exploration of variations on a theme.
- Improvisation, together with other exercises and critique, develops a sense of physical presence and improves the use of the voice—one learns to face the audience, neither upstaging nor being upstaged by others, to speak clearly, and to avoid a monotone in pitch, timbre or emphasis. Together with observing other scenes on same theme, it encourages a sense for context, arising from the audience, the environment, or even internal dynamics of the scene; in particular, experience with improvisation teaches one to wait when interrupted by audience reaction or something like a loud train passing by.
- Finally, participating in a semester-long group improvisational theater is as useful for team building and confidence as sporting or outdoor activities. When pairs/groups vary within a class, it can also develop a flexibility in forming teams and collaborations and in making them effective.

When improvisation is used in place of (or as a supplement to) role-playing, it is more likely to lead to consideration of emotional and persuasive dimensions of problems, and to better and more immediate response to unexpected reactions from participants or to unexpected results from analyses. With practice, it may partially counteract the tendency of many role-playing teams to collaborate in quickly finding a smooth solution in favor of a more thorough exploration of the problem.

3. APPLICATIONS

Teaching has been described as closely related to improvisational theater [21], and experience in improvisational theater combined with subject mastery and teacher training can only supply another dimension in teacher preparation. It is also recommended to scientists [5] for improving the quality of their presentations, not only in better physical presence and vocal quality, but

also to inculcate better communication skills, a sense of audience reaction, and improved response to questions—or perhaps even to relevant points in earlier presentations.

In addition, teachers who have had experience with improvisational theater are clearly better prepared to use the approach in their own classes. Improvisation, as experience has shown, can lead to greater student interest and engagement [8]: “...improvisation also helps students build confidence and communication skills at any age” [2]. Further, some of these techniques can be adapted even to teaching technical subjects such as mathematics [13].

It has additional value in other domains, even technical disciplines. The need to assess and react quickly and intelligently, while preserving flexibility, is well-recognized as a key military asset (as in von Moltke’s classic quote “No battle plan survives contact with the enemy” [11]), as is the building of collaborative teams [23]. These principles are often cited in the management literature [4] as desirable management characteristics. Madson in [15] explicitly suggests improvisation for executives, and in [16] recommends thirteen principles of improvisational theater as guides for daily life. In decision sciences, it can supplement or enhance role-playing for decision analysis, and can be used to make teaching case studies [7] richer. Moreover, changing roles between supervisor and worker (or in other stakeholder pairs or groups) in an improvisational setting can deepen appreciation of the interactions of different parties and interests.

In software engineering and related fields, acquiring habits of exploration from improvisation can encourage and reinforce attitudes, practices and approaches at the heart of modern software practices such as agile development [3], team building and trust [6], planning combined with flexibility and adaptability, and ready collaboration [9]. These habits also develop the openness and use of multiple views at the heart of requirements analysis and testing. This in turn makes it easier to see that plans and processes are not frozen, but

provide a useful, mutable scaffold on which to hang and measure progress.

Nousala [19] suggests that improvisational theater techniques will usefully enhance current interactive and flipped-classroom approaches in forming “learning [and teaching] structures of the future” [20] as applied to communities of practice, learning and knowledge [14] or collaborative efforts such as collaborative sustainability [1].

Kirova [10] reports that a closely related technique, preconditioned role-playing, is common in many enterprises. As an example, in workshops and courses for managers and technical personnel in software development, participants are assigned not only a stakeholder or functional role, but also a charge to behave or act with a given personality, mission, or objective — either presenting a tricky challenge, or in a manner inconsistent with agile values and practices. After such an exercise, students — both participants and observers — are asked to debrief and analyze the behaviors.

Finally, Drama Therapy [17] uses improvisation as an adjunct to other techniques for related reasons, including problem solving and exploration of one’s own behavior and reactions.

However, no one of these approaches takes advantage of all of the benefits of improvisational theater: presentation, voice and body skills; planning with adaptability; consideration of perspectives, alternatives and variations; flexibility and reactivity; team-building and collaboration; and exploration of the emotional and behavioral side of problems.

4. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

As a teen (many years ago), I had the privilege of six years of improvisational theater with Rosilyn Wilder, actress, director and scholar, and a noted advocate of theater for teens and the elderly [26], and a lecturer at NYU and the New School. Weekly classes in improvisation were supplemented with an hour of dance and movement, plus intermittent instruction and

exercises on skills like sense memory, proper breathing and use of the voice. In addition, the group presented one or two productions each year, largely for parents, friends, and of course for fundraising.

I benefitted from the experience, both personally and as an instructor and researcher in mathematics and computer science. Among the most important and consistent are: proper use of the body and voice, adaptable lesson plans, and the use of multiple strategies—some constructed on the fly—for explaining the same concepts, as well as (almost always) stopping for a major interruption. I also believe that my sense of the classroom is much better than it would otherwise be, though hardly perfect.

I have been less consistent in actively involving students or in improvising, in spite of my claims, but have seen very good results when I do. Sometimes it seems the only way to get difficult concepts across. I have consistently used parts of this approach in teaching software requirements in various courses—in particular, in considering the interests of secondary stakeholders.

As a researcher, I am more comfortable with tackling new areas and playing around with ideas, with working with others, and with presenting. I enjoy collaboration, even when it means seriously rewriting or totally reorganizing a research project or a paper. I do not memorize talks, and feel comfortable with questions—and even with being wrong on occasion.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper reviews the characteristics of improvisational theater, and argues for its value across a wide variety of disciplines. Improvisation is recognized as a valuable asset not only for teachers, but is more broadly for anyone involved in presentation or with problem solving. It can also be useful in extending role-playing and problem solving, and in developing flexible planning and adaptability, which is highly useful in software engineering, decision science, military science, and other fields.

Schools of Education and other programs developing teachers should consider requiring a semester of improvisation, or better, a two-semester sequence, including some instruction in movement and voice. Other programs, including technical programs in which flexibility is important, could helpfully incorporate exercises and workshops using improvisation as an asset for professional development.

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