Using Improvisation and Performativity as Teaching Tools

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A long, long time ago when I was 22 years old, I taught in a high school about 30 minutes from Providence RI. The area was pretty rural then and isolated—many of the students told me they’d never even been to Providence. I taught English and, in those days, had the freedom to choose my materials and methods. My students really appreciated my creativity and my urging them to be creative. Even so, I envied the art teachers because being creative and fostering creativity was what they were supposed to do. I thought they had all the fun.

I didn’t become an art teacher or even remain a high school English teacher. Instead I went to graduate school in linguistics and developmental psychology. You see, I loved language—the art of it, the creativity of it, and the effortless way we learn it as babies. And through my study and research, I discovered that playing, improvising and performing are the secrets to learning language—indeed to learning anything.

Looking back, I realized that in my high school classes, what I was doing was helping teenagers become language artists by giving them opportunities to play with words, to improvise with each other, and to perform as wordsmiths—just like they did when they were little.

I share this piece of my history as a lead in to talking about improvisation and performativity as teaching tools. Because the most creative and most developmental kind of play is improvised and performed. And the deepest and longest-lasting kind of learning is playful.

It’s hard to play in our classrooms though. That’s because we’ve been socialized to equate learning with work and play as something else—frivolous, a luxury, something we don’t have time for if we’re serious about learning and succeeding. This breaks my heart, really. We shoot ourselves in the foot when we stop playing in the name of learning, because with only school **work**, kids get turned off and resentful, and have few outlets for their energy, creativity, imagination and sociability to flourish.

All of my adult life has been about bringing playful improvisation and performativity back into people’s lives, whatever their age or situation. And into learning environments, both in schools and outside of schools. I want to help people reinitiate their development, their creativity, their curiosity, their desire to learn. I say reinitiate because we all have these capacities and they’re just waiting to be awakened and supported.

What I mean by development is not the textbook listing of stages that a human being goes through. It’s not something that happens TO us. It’s something we CREATE. Development is a social process of creating something qualitatively new out of what exists. Infant to baby to toddler to child to teenager to adult—these are qualitative, not quantitative, changes. Babbling babies become speakers of a language—and it’s life-changing.

One of my heroes is the Russian psychologist from the 1920s and 30s, Lev Vygotsky. He put forth a social-cultural understanding of learning and development as linked to each other, with play as a centerpiece. Playing is how children develop, he said, because in play children perform as if they were “a head taller”—they stretch; they do things they don’t yet know how to do, they suspend the “real world” and create something fantastical out of what they’ve experienced; and they actively create who they’re becoming.

When we have “conversations” with babbling babies, we and they are playing, we’re improvising with sounds and words. They’re performing as speakers before they know the first thing about language. When we give them markers and papers, we and they are playing, we’re improvising with images and representation and perspective and color. They’re performing as artists before they know the first thing about art.

The magic here is that we adults are relating to their performing selves, to who they are becoming. We’re not stuck on what they don’t know. We’re not obsessed with correcting them. Like skilled improv comedians, we accept their offers (“ba-ba mama”) and we add something (“Yes, Mama’s warming your bottle’). We follow the basic rule of improv—what’s called “Yes, and.” It’s what makes an improv scene funny. But it’s way more than that. It’s the key to the socialness of human development and learning: Accept and build—and people will keep becoming, keep learning, keep growing.

As art educators, you’re probably familiar with the famous saying of Picasso: “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.” Vygotsky’s statement about performing a head taller through play helps me understand how profound Picasso was. I think he’s pointing to the trap we get into—once we know how to do something, we become less willing and able to do new things. We get stuck doing what we know how to do. Imagination reigns supreme when we’re little—when we don’t yet know that we’re supposed to know. We take risks. We learn how to paint, draw, sing, dance, talk, even think, because we are supported to **play** at “painting” “drawing” “singing” “dancing” “talking” and “thinking.” Because we’re supported to **perform** as painters, drawers, singers, dancers, talkers and thinkers *Before we know, we do*. We play, we perform, we pretend our way to growth, learning and knowledge. For me, this is the fundamental process of human learning and development.

To continue becoming an artist throughout life, then, we can’t let all the knowledge we’re accumulating about art, color, perspective, how things are supposed to look, etc., take over or suppress our imagination and stop us from doing things with paint and pencil and color and perspective that we’ve never done before.

Vygotsky tells us that imagination and experience build on each other—we might say they improvise! In early childhood, experience and imagination are in constant interplay. Experience gets put to use to create a new experience, which creates new imagining, which creates new experience, and so on. Experiencing live animals in the zoo, for example, can build on and transform children’s play with their stuffed animals into something new, something other than what they experienced at the zoo. And this imaginative play is another experience—to potentially learn with and from.

The unfortunate irony of growing up is that the greater richness of our experiences doesn’t always get put to use by our imagination to create new experiences. That’s because the line between reality and fantasy becomes rigid, and “what’s real” comes to dominate our lives. “Oh, that’s not possible. It couldn’t happen. Dogs don’t moo. Numbers don’t dance. Trees don’t talk.” Our imaginings too often become limited by “what’s real.” And our experiences, like say a trip to Italy, too often get put in the “Well, I did that and it was great” box of memories.

To my way of thinking, learning—at its best—is the continuous and emergent interplay between experience and imagination. This has special meaning, I think, for art educators. As artists, as people who traverse the ever-porous border between experience and imagination, I imagine that only passing on knowledge and technique rubs against your grain, your instincts as artists, your emotionality as creators, and your aspirations as educators.

Perhaps with this new way of seeing I’ve given you, you will find ways to bring your experience and imagination into a playful conversation with the experience and imagination of your students.

Like Picasso’s challenge of how to remain an artist one you’re grown up, my challenge is how to remain playful once you’re a teacher. I don’t mean just playing games. I actually don’t mean any particular activity. By playful, I mean *how* you do something, as distinct from what it is you’re doing. Doing something playfully is to be improvisational and performatory.

I’ve learned that you can do just about anything playfully. Even testing—in the school I ran a while ago, we’d have the children perform as test makers and test takers before they took the official standardized tests. They had to improvisationally perform as test takers before they knew how. When you consciously perform as someone you are not (yet), you are playing, you are doing what you don’t know how to do, you are opening yourself to imagination and possibility, you’re learning and you’re becoming who you are not.

So far, I’ve mostly been sharing broadly how improvisation and performativity generate development and learning. Now let’s take a closer look, especially at the impact they can have on your classroom as a teaching and learning environment.

Take improv. This kind of performance is becoming popular as a teaching tool, not just in classrooms, but also in medical schools to improve doctor communication with patients, in corporations to build teams and develop leaders, and as a counseling and therapeutic tool for people with autism, with dementia, and with neurological illness such as Parkinson’s.

As I said earlier, the basic rule of improv is yes and. Here is what that looks like on the stage. Someone sets the scene as you and your partner are at the beach in your bathing suits and it starts to snow. You speak first, starting the scene by saying, “Wow! They told us the weather on Mars was unpredictable!” Following the rule of “yes, and” your partner might say, “Yeah, I’m glad they prepared us and we brought our skis along with our bathing suits.” If your partner instead says no and negates what you said—“We’re not on Mars” or “No, they didn’t”—the scene won’t go anywhere. Your partner has to accept what you say and build the scene with it.

In the classroom, teachers can model “yes, and.” One way is to say to the class after one student says something—“Following up on what John said, I wonder if we could say some more colors, add to what John’s saying.” Compared to saying, “Next. What do others think?” inviting through “yes and” helps create an ensemble performance and generate group creativity.

There’s another improv rule that helps build the classroom as an ensemble. It’s “Make others look good.” Improv comedians are always looking to make their partners look good, not to catch them and make them look foolish. Teachers can help students by practicing and teaching improv as a way to support each other to participate. There must be **something,** some offer in what they’ve said that you can build with. Find it. And use it to make them look good. Not to show they’re wrong.

This strategy really helps to make both teachers and students great listeners. Because you’re not listening to find fault or to correct, you’re not listening to make fun of someone, you’re not listening to see if you agree. You’re listening, as I like to say, to build the conversation and build the knowledge.

Another benefit of improv is that it involves everyone and makes them feel like they belong to something. Everyone’s in it together doing something, creating something together. Vygotsky called this a collective way of working together. I really like that expression. “Instead of a competitive way of working together, we’re building a collective way of working together.”

If the classroom environment is playfully performative and improvisational, then you don’t have to know the answer to participate in a lesson, to learn history, learn how to add or multiply, or learn perspective. You don’t have to know everything in order to participate, because it’s not focusing on what is in your head. It’s focusing on, “Let’s create this community of learners together.” It’s like relating to **the classroom as a stage** for the performance of development and learning. The creative question for everyone is: “How are we going to perform our improvisational learning today?”

I hope that what I’ve shared about play, performance and improvisation resonates with much what you already do in your classrooms and inspires new practices. I also hope that you’ll keep the “how are we going to perform” question in mind. Shifting to seeing your classrooms as performance stages, and approaching teaching and learning as playful and improvisational—that’s invaluable if you want to create a community of learners in your classroom, one in which you and your students exercise and grow your creative imaginations.

Have fun!