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Joan S. Ingalls

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# Improv Theater Games: Performatory Team-building Activities

JOAN S. INGALLS

**I**n the hyper-individualistic culture of the modern world, team-building can be a challenge for teachers and coaches. In their effort to build teams they often offer the familiar slogan, “There is no ‘I’ in ‘Team!’”; they know that to build a team, children must give up some individuality. Research on the effectiveness of team or ensemble building in the classroom and on the sports field shows that in a strong team setting, children develop their cognitive abilities (Sawyer, 1997), find new ways to talk about anxiety (Lobman, 2013), and achieve higher levels of performance (Sawyer, 2003). Goodhue (2015) provided

an exhaustive survey of the literature in medicine, education, sports and industry showing that improvisational theater (improv) games can help in building teams, as well as enhance communication and goal achievement, camaraderie, mutual respect and creativity.

Despite the lack of research focusing specifically on how to help children find a balance between teamwork and individuality, teach-

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Joan S. Ingalls (joansingalls@gmail.com) is a mental health counselor in private sport counseling practice, Sports Focused Training, in New York, NY, and Salisbury, CT.

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ers and coaches seem to understand that when children do find this balance, they grow emotionally and are better team builders. This article offers teachers and coaches a way to use improv games to support children in finding this balance. While this article describes five improv games and a *performatory* approach to teaching them, the theater world has a large database of improv games for teachers and coaches to choose from (Atkins, 1994; Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1986).

## A Performatory Approach

Successful team builders help team members to face their conflicts and fears related to giving up their individuality. When taught with a performatory approach, improv games make giving up individuality fun and rewarding. For example, in the improv game “Yes, and” (described in detail later), the goal is for the team to tell a story collectively with each player adding a sentence, one at a time around the circle. One rule is that each sentence should move the story forward a *small* step. If the story is about Tommy hiking with grandpa, and a player adds a sentence that has Tommy shopping, the act of adding that line to the story is the *performance* of individuality. It is the performance of “I want the story to go my way; I want to be special; it’s more fun if the story goes my way,” or “The group is telling a boring story.” This understanding — of the performatory approach — helps teachers and coaches “build with the offer” as in an improvisational scene; it makes it fun to give up some individuality. Building with the offer, as described in the section below, is an essential improv concept.

## Building with the Offer

The performance of individuality in improv games may be painful and frustrating to watch. In the example above, the story of Tommy is on the verge of becoming a disorganized farce in which some children could become disruptive. With the performatory approach teachers and coaches do not view children, such as the one who took Tommy shopping, as uncooperative or as having a behavioral problem. They consider the possibility that children are *performing* their relationship to the group, and expressing their conflict around individuality — the cultural norm that requires them to be creative, independent and self-sufficient. Leaders, for example, may say to the group that is telling the story about Tommy, “It’s fun to be creative. It’s hard to be boring. What do we think of telling a boring story? What’s it like to be boring together — to create boredom together? What happens when we make the story boring?” Or they might say, “Let’s each say how they *really* would want the story to go if it were their story alone.”

Here the leader is picking up on the child’s views of “boring,” “individuality” and “creativity” in the sentence, “Tommy went shopping.” In improv this is called *building with the offer*. The leader is building the group by making use of the child’s offer; the leader is performing, “It’s fun to play with boredom. Let’s play with boredom!” Children who experience this response from their teachers and coaches may have a sense that their offers are useful and contributing to building the group.

In building with children’s offers teachers and coaches are creating the conditions for the group participants to perform less individually. To do that teachers and coaches give up their agenda of getting the players to cooperate and behave themselves. They embrace the idea that there are no bad or wrong offers, only

offers that are more or less difficult to build with. When playing team-building games, the offer of individuality is annoying and hard to build with. Successful team builders understand that the challenge, nevertheless, is to build with those difficult offers. They keep in mind that individuality is a pervasive and sometimes subtle cultural phenomenon that children have learned. They accept that children may even find it confusing when they are expected to give it up.

## Offers That Build a Team

“Yes, and” is the classic, archetypal improv game. It is the best game with which to illustrate both the concept of *building with an offer* and the complexity of any one offer. For example, the line, “Yes, and it started raining” could mean that someone will bring in the laundry, or cancel the picnic, or celebrate the end of the drought. Depending on the story that the group is telling, the next person in the circle could say, “Yes, and Johnny ran to take in the laundry,” or “Yes, and Johnny called Jane to cancel the picnic,” or “Yes, and happy that the drought was over, Johnny went outside to dance in the rain.”

If players have a vision of how the story should proceed, they may ignore an earlier sentence in the story that had Johnny hanging up the laundry or planning a picnic or living on a farm, and add the sentence, “Yes, and Johnny began reefing the mainsail.” For leaders using the performatory approach, this player is performing individuality. The challenge is to build the group with this offer. Once again, the leader may ask the group to play with boredom or creativity, or may ask the group, “What would it be like for all of us to add a line that slowly builds the story — that adds one small new thing to the story? What’s hard about doing that? What does it mean to add one small thing?”

In the game Who Started the Motion? (described in detail later) the players stand in a circle and follow the movements of player A, who they have chosen to “start the motion.” They try to follow player A in such a way that player B, standing in the middle of the circle, cannot figure out who they are following. If A makes quick sharp karate moves, the group will not be able to disguise him or her. Player B will immediately guess that A started the motion. Here the offer of individuality, “I want to show off my karate moves” or “I must do something special and interesting” causes the team to “lose” the game.

The structure of the game demands that A perform the offer, “Let’s do this together!” and lead with movements that are easily followed. If A does not make this offer, the team loses the game; they cannot conceal player A and do not fool player B. The demand to perform “together” is in every improv team-building game. Each of the games described here has consequences for not meeting that demand. In “Yes, and,” the consequence is a disjointed, unsatisfying story. In the Name Game, the consequence is that people bump into each other; in Group Sculpture the group builds a disjointed, incoherent sculpture; in Mirrors there is no experience of being in front of a mirror or creating a mirror.

Not just the players, but the leaders — teachers and coaches — of games have a relationship to the demand, “Do this together!” When leaders pick up on the difficult offer of individuality and use it to build the group, they are performing, “Let’s work hard to do this together!” When they do that, they are in harmony with the structure of the games, and they are using the performatory approach.

## Leading Improv Games

The five improv games that will be described emphasize team building; they are appropriate for teachers, coaches and children who are at any level of expertise in improv. They are easy and fun. They require only an open space or, in some cases, a circle of chairs. It is usual to play a game for about 20 minutes, but the time varies with the group size; games in which each person gets a turn may take longer.

In the classroom the games can be used at the beginning of the day or the beginning of a class period to foster collaborative work, or at the end of a class perhaps for a sense of closure. The more active games, for example, *Who Started the Motion?*, may be used after a period of intense individual mental work; the less active games such as “Yes, and” may be used after a period of intense physical activity. Before a practice or competition coaches may find that the games can focus the team on the task ahead; afterward, the games may help to remind players that, win or lose, “We are in this together; we still have the important work of building the team.” Coaches may lead a discussion about the relevance of the games to teamwork on the field, and teachers may lead a discussion on the relevance of the games to teamwork in the classroom.

When leading the games, teachers and coaches should keep in mind the emotionality of each game, including:

1. How hard it is emotionally to give up one’s agenda and embrace the emerging agenda of the team. Adults teach kids to share

and to be independent; being part of a team is both of these and neither of these; it is a new skill and can be confusing.

2. What the emotional experience of giving up personal agendas looks like in each game. In their confusion, children may get angry or frightened.

3. The emotional effect of playing with the offer of individuality. Being labeled — even implicitly — as a “bad” or “failed” team member can be humiliating.

4. How easy (or hard) emotionally it is to give the impression that there is a right and wrong way to play the games. Culture at large makes so much of right and wrong that it is easy to slip into this duality. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that team building is not about being right or wrong; it is about doing things together. (Emphasizing right and wrong takes players out of the team-building activity.)

### 1. Name Game

*Purpose:* There are many name games. They can help new groups learn each other’s names, or they can serve as an icebreaker or warm-up.

*Skills/goals:* This game requires the players to widen their visual field in order to pay attention to and coordinate their movements with the group.

*Size of group:* This game can be played comfortably with a group as small as eight or as large as 25.



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*Equipment needed:* A room large enough to accommodate participants standing in a circle. Name tags for participants, if participants do not already know each other's names.

*Time needed:* 10–20 minutes, depending on the size of the group.

*Instructions for the leader:* The leader explains the steps below, after which the game commences.

1. A points to B across the circle and says B's name.
2. As A says B's name, A begins walking toward B.
3. Immediately, upon hearing her name, B points to C across the circle, says C's name and begins walking toward C.
4. A takes B's place in the circle, B takes C's place in the circle, and so on, until there is a smooth flow of pointing, name calling, and movement across the circle.

The game may end when everyone has had a chance to change places several times and players do not need help with each other's names.

*Challenges:* The challenge in this game is to remember everyone's name and to support each other to make the flow of "traffic" across the circle smooth.

*Tips:* Leaders may encourage participants to help each other with names. They may call out the rules of the game as reminders, including the instruction to point emphatically with an outstretched arm, call out the name, move slowly, and navigate across the circle so as not to interfere with other players. If a participant seems reluctant to point boldly, the leader might instruct everyone to point timidly and see how that changes the game: "Does it mean everyone has to be twice as alert? What is it like to be hard to see or be seen? Does that make the game more fun?"

## 2. "Yes, and" Collective Story

*Purpose:* This game teaches the fundamental improv principle of giving and accepting offers — listening and responding.

*Skills/goals:* Clearing one's mind of one's own agenda. The magic of "Yes, and" is that the players quickly begin to care about the characters in the story; each player has a vision of the characters — what they look like and the scene around them. The trick is for each player to allow their vision to be modified with each new sentence, and to tell a story in one voice with each person adding a sentence that they preface with "Yes, and."

*Size of group:* This game can be played comfortably with a group as small as five or six, or as large as 25.

*Equipment needed:* A room (with chairs) large enough to accommodate the participants sitting in a circle.

*Time needed:* 10–25 minutes, depending on the size of the group.

*Instructions for the leader:* "Yes" means "I heard and accept all that has come before." "And" means "I am adding something to build the story that the group is telling." There are many rules for the game, and leaders may not want to list all of them at the beginning. They may stop the story at any time and add or repeat a rule, but at the beginning, on the first go-around, it is best to allow the players to experience telling the story without any interruptions.

1. The group sits in a circle.
2. The leader explains to the group that they will be telling a group story — going around the circle with each person adding a sentence in turn. The rules are as follows:
  - a. Use the third person in telling the story.
  - b. Use action verbs. Avoid thinking and feeling verbs.

c. Develop the story in small steps. Avoid big shifts. The idea is for the group to create the story, not to be individually creative.

d. Do not have your sentence prepared ahead of time. Make it up after hearing the previous line.

e. Do not try to get the story to go a certain way.

3. The leader asks for someone to suggest a title for the story.

4. After a title is selected the leader repeats the title and adds the first sentence of the story. The first sentence should include the main character's name, the setting, the time and an activity, such as, "Sally awoke on her birthday and ran down the stairs."

5. The person to the right or left of the leader then says, "Yes, and" and adds the next sentence to the story such as, "Yes, and she headed straight for the package on the kitchen table."

6. The story continues around the circle with each person beginning with "Yes, and" and adding their sentence to build the story.

7. The game may end when the story seems to be coming to a natural end, or after each player has added three or four sentences, or if the players start to become confused because the story is too disjointed. The leader may end the game with a final sentence "Yes, and the end!"

*Challenges:* Participants often want the story to be exciting or creative. They want the story to go their way.

*Tips:* The leader may invite the players to say what it was like for them to play the game. What was hard about it? Was it hard to listen to the story? Were you thinking about what sentence you would add? Was it hard to use the third person and action verbs? What was your image of the main character? What color was his hair? How tall was he?

*Variations:*

1. Tell a story without beginning with "Yes, and."
2. Tell a story with each person, one at a time, going into the center of the circle and holding a pose as an addition to the story.
3. Tell the story with each player adding one word instead of a whole sentence. One-word "Yes, and" makes it difficult for players to perform individuality.

## 3. Who Started the Motion?

*Purpose:* Challenges visual observing skills and awareness of one's own movements.

*Skills/goals:* The goal of this game is for the group and the person who started the motion (the "leader") to collectively hide who the leader is. The leader must blend in and must be blended in. This may be a challenge for players who believe that good leadership means standing out and being special, creative and innovative. This game puts the emphasis on leading both from in front and behind. It makes the followers the leaders in the sense that the leaders must adapt their movements and watch the followers to make sure they are following. This mixing up of leader and follower is a theme that can be played with in many games, but especially in "Who Started the Motion?" and "Mirrors."

*Size of group:* Good for groups of 10–25 participants. Smaller groups make it easier to guess who the leader is.

*Equipment needed:* A room large enough to accommodate the group standing in a circle with one arm's length between them.

*Time needed:* A minimum of 10 minutes, but this is a fun game and the teacher can keep it going as long as time permits and it seems to be a challenge.

*Instructions to the leader:*

1. The group forms a circle.
2. One person volunteers to be “it” and leaves the room.
3. The group designates a “leader.”
4. The leader begins the movement, which everyone follows.
5. “It” is called into the center of the circle where “it” has three guesses as to who the leader is.
6. After three guesses or a correct guess, “it” joins the circle.
7. A new “it” is selected (a new volunteer or the old leader) and leaves the room.
8. The game repeats until everyone has had a turn leading and being “it.”

*Challenges:* The “leaders” move too slowly and do not adapt their movement to how well the group is following. The “followers” look directly at the leader.

*Tips:* The group can agree ahead of time to look at student A who is not the leader, and when A gives the cue, change their focus to student B who is also not the leader. The group can make up various similar strategies to trick the student who is “it.”

## 4. Mirrors

*Purpose:* This game offers an opportunity to play with giving up individuality in a slow, meditative environment.

*Skill/goals:* Players may experience that they are merely learning the skill of following, but they are also being a mirror, reflecting their partners’ movement. If players are sloppy about mirroring (raising an arm is good enough, no need to raise it slowly or raise it leading with the elbow exactly as their partner does), this may be a performance of their conflict with giving up individuality. Or it may be that players have poor visual-kinesthetic synesthesia, which refers to difficulty transforming information from the visual to the kinesthetic sensory system. They can see the movement, but it is hard to know what it would feel like to do it; they do not know whether they are doing it or not. Mirrors may help improve visual-kinesthetic synesthesia because players get feedback from their “mirror” about what they look like.

*Size of group:* This game can be played with as many pairs as the space permits and that the leader can observe and respond to.

*Equipment needed:* A room large enough so that the pairs can spread out and not to bump into each other as they move.

*Time needed:* 10–20 minutes.

*Instructions to the leader:*

1. The group breaks up into pairs.
2. Each pair faces each other about three feet apart.
3. They decide who is A and who is B.
4. The game has four “phases” that the leader times:
  - a. A initiates the movement; B reflects for 2 or 3 minutes. The leader calls “freeze” and “switch.”
  - b. B initiates the movement for 2 or 3 minutes. A reflects.
  - c. The leader calls out “switch” every 20 seconds, and the pairs trade initiating and reflecting back and forth, then every 10 seconds, and so on, until their roles become blurred.
  - d. Both “initiate/follow” simultaneously for 2 or 3 minutes.

*Challenges:* How hard was it for leaders to adjust their movements when they saw that their partners were not following? How hard is it for leaders to know whether they are being fol-

lowed? After all, they do not know what they look like. What is it like for partners to trust that they are accurately reflecting each other? The members of each pair who are initiating the movement must watch to see that their “mirror” is in sync with them. They cannot do whatever they want; they are members of a team of two.

*Tips:* Try several variations on this game.

1. A pair goes into the center of the circle and plays “Mirrors” while the group tries to guess who is the leader.
2. Each pair has a “coach” who reminds them to slow down and gives them other tips to get in sync.

## 5. Group Sculpture

*Purpose:* To slow down the activity of “listening” and responding; to *see* (rather than hear) the group “story.”

*Skills/goals:* The participants learn not to use their own ideas, but to make small adjustments that add to the ideas of the group/collective sculpture by physically moving the participants in the sculpture.

*Size of group:* Ideal for a group of 12 or 14.

*Equipment needed:* A room large enough for the group to stand in a circle at least one arm’s length apart.

*Time needed:* With a small group, allow 20 minutes for this game. It can be done with a larger group, but it will take more time.

*Instructions to the leader:* This is a nonverbal “Yes, and” game.

Participants have time to experience the process in deciding/creating the “sentence” they will add (i.e., how they will build the sculpture). Unlike in a verbal “Yes, and,” participants can see the result and view it together; they do not have to remember the story; they can see the collective “story” they have built. The leader times the sculpting periods and gives a signal when to start and stop sculpting. The leader encourages participants to look for “offers” in the details of the sculpture being shaped.

1. The group breaks evenly in two.
2. They form two concentric circles. The inner circle is the “clay” and faces out. The outer circle is the “sculptor” and faces in.
3. The leader gives the signal for the players in the outer circle to start “sculpting” the person directly in front of them.
4. After 30 seconds of “sculpting,” the leader gives the signal to stop.
5. For the next 30 seconds, the “sculptors” move clockwise all the way around the circle examining the sculpture.
6. They stop moving when they arrive at the person standing after the one they previously sculpted.
7. They repeat steps 3–5 adding something to the sculpture that fits what the group is building. The sculpture is finished when they have sculpted the person to the left of the first person they sculpted and made a final transit around the circle to observe the sculpture.
8. They then step back and observe the group sculpture.
9. The leader may have a group discussion at this point or may have the inner and outer circles switch places and repeat the steps shaping a new sculpture. This will add an additional 10 minutes to the game. After that, the leaders may have a group discussion.

*Challenges:* This is a “hands-on” game. “Sculptors” need to be firm, but gentle. The “clay” needs to be pliable, but hold the shapes that they have been molded into.



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*Tips:* The main coaching tip is to slow down the sculptors. Slow background music may help. Have a group discussion in which you ask questions such as: What was it like to make a group sculpture? Did anyone feel that the sculpture turned out the way they envisioned it? What was it like to have your vision realized or not? How did you decide what to add? What was it like to view the entire sculpture before making your addition?

## Summary

Research has shown that strong teamwork supports groups to learn and perform at a high level, and that improv games can build strong teams. Children, however, learn individualism at an early age; they learn that they are expected to be independent and self-sufficient. They also learn that they are expected to be good team players. Teachers and coaches seem to sense that sometimes, when children are disruptive and oppositional, they might be reacting to what seems to them like competing and incompatible expectations to be both an individual and a team member. This article offers teachers and coaches improv games to try out when doing team building with children. The performatory approach to the games gives them a tool to help children resolve their conflicts around giving up some individuality as they become team members. Teachers and coaches can learn and practice the improv principle of “building with the offer” even when the offer says, “This game is boring!

I want it to be *my* idea. I want to be the star.” There are hundreds of games (see [Improvcyclopedia.org](http://Improvcyclopedia.org); Lobman & Lundquist, 2007) that teachers and coaches can adapt to the needs of classroom, physical education and sport activities, all of which help children to be better team players.

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