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## Improvisation: Not Just for Kids

By Kerrigan Sullivan

The great German composer Carl Orff is known for turning an ancient proverb into a method for teaching music: “Tell me, I will forget, show me, I might remember, involve me, I will understand.” Orff was not only a composer but also became known for adopting this philosophy of involvement into a theory in music education, and much of his pedagogy survives today. His idea holds true not just when teaching music but when trying to teach anything. Research shows that students at any age learn better when they are involved with the subject. In his book on arts education and its effect on learning, *Arts with the Brain in Mind*, Eric Jensen asserts that “Brain research has increasingly shown that the bodily-kinesthetic arts contribute to the development and enhancement of critical neurobiological systems including cognition, emotions, immune, circulatory, and perceptual-motor” (102). Jensen summarizes his research on kinesthetic arts by stating, “The research, the theory, and real-world classroom experience clearly support sustaining or increasing the role of movement in learning” (102).

Of course, many elementary educators include movement and dramatic exercises in their classrooms. If we search for books or Web sites devoted to theatre games for children, we will find hundreds of options, but when students reach the college classroom, a more didactic style of learning becomes the norm.

In *Handbook of College Teaching*, Keith W. Pritchard and Robert

*“Theatre techniques, particularly those structures used in improvisation, are an effective way to get students to connect actively with each other and engage more fully with the material they need to learn.”*

McLaran Sawyer recommend that college professors incorporate experiential learning into the classroom:

Today education is in crisis. Citizens and institutions alike are demanding that classroom instruction dramatically increase learning effectiveness.

In an age when many students are passive learners and when the traditional didactically oriented modes of instruction reinforce passivity, revitalization of instruction requires a serious consideration of active learning. Especially in higher education, instructors must expand their repertoires to include active learning approaches that challenge students to function as adult learners who take responsibility for their learning. (124)

In the book *Honored but Invisible*, W. Norton Grubb and Helena Worthen look specifically at the community college classroom and note a shift in recent times towards a more active classroom: “Many experienced teachers have moved away from didactic approaches and are critical of their colleagues who continue to teach in teacher-directed ways” (39). However, they state that “Of all classes, 74 percent follow an authoritative approach to interpretation regardless to their approach on technical and social dimensions” (167). Grubb and Worthen conclude that the danger in this is that “students are being asked to accept this authority rather than create their own authority or participate in their own education” (167). So how can community college faculty encourage students to participate in their own education? One proven way is to bring theatre into the classroom.

Theatre techniques, particularly those structures used in improvisation, are an effective way to get students to connect actively with each other and engage more fully with the material they need to learn. These exercises are simple, and neither professors nor their students need to have a degree in theatre to engage in them fully. Teachers act as guides for their students. By using such exercises, we help students to take risks, increase their confidence, and demonstrate the critical-thinking skills and knowledge of concepts needed for the course – while having fun learning together.

As a teaching artist, I have brought improvisation techniques into many different classrooms and used drama to teach a variety of subjects including literature, history, and math. I have found these methods to be not only effective, but also inspiring. As I offer simple suggestions and activities that have worked in my classes, and that may also help you to engage your students on a more active level, I will focus on three areas: creating the space, involving students physically, and involving students vocally.

### **Creating the Space**

One of the most important keys to successful teaching is to establish an environment that is conducive to the type of learning one wants to take place. Newton’s first law of motion states that an object at rest tends to stay at rest and an object in motion tends to stay in motion with the same speed

and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. This includes students. It is easy for a student to start the semester passive and remain passive the whole semester. However, by acting as an unbalancing force, we can knock the student out of that passive role and onto the path of becoming an active learner.

If we want our classroom to be an active classroom, we must begin to engage the students in a direct and meaningful way from the first day of class. When students are called upon to be involved from the first day of class, there will be less time for them to come to rest and so remain at rest. If we wait until midway through the semester to start getting them on their feet, we fight the laws of physics and typically encounter resistance.

In the beginning, I find it best to stick with low-risk games that involve everyone at once. If students feel put on the spot, they will shut down, but working in small or large groups helps them to feel more comfortable and to explore the games fully. Even though these games may take valuable time away from all the duties of the first day, the payoff will last through the whole semester. Most of these games can be structured to take as little as ten or fifteen minutes to complete, although they can be lengthened. Here are three of my favorite icebreakers:

***Getting-to-Know-You Bingo (10-25 minutes).*** This is an oldie, but a goodie. Make up a bingo card with various facts in the squares such as “Owns a pair of red socks” or “Loves country music.” I think it’s best to mix the simple ones such as “Has at least one sibling” with the more unusual “Loves spiders.” Each student gets a bingo card and circulates around the classroom finding people who fit on each square. They then write in the first name of the student on that space. If we can’t find anyone in the class who has red socks or loves spiders, I just give everyone that square for free. The class can play until someone has bingo and then do a speed round to see who can fill up the whole card. I like to have the winning student read the names of the people on each square so we learn a little something about everyone in the class. Depending on the size of the class, you should limit the number of people that you can use per square. My usual rules with a class of 25 are that (A) students can only use each person in the class once and (B) students can’t use themselves. When we go to the whole card speed round, these rules make it harder but also force students to interact with everyone. If they are struggling to complete the card, you can let them double up on a few squares. I enjoy seeing which student is the first to ask me if I fit on any squares and how long it takes before someone asks to use me. By the end of the game, we all enjoy knowing about those students who have unique squares (owning red socks), and most importantly, we have created a feeling of community in the classroom.

***Who Am I? (15 minutes).*** Essentially, this is a variation of twenty questions. There are many ways to play and many ways to adapt this to different curricula (perhaps to focus on “what” rather than “who” topics). I make up stickers with names of well-known people, living and dead as well as real and fictional. I put the stickers on the students’ foreheads (but if someone objects to the forehead, I stick it on his or her back instead). Students then begin to circulate around the room to ask a yes or no question about their persons. I usually specify yes or no only and that they can only ask a single question per person. Once they figure out who they are, I ask them to continue circulating. They should then introduce themselves and help others find answers. If they get stuck, the class as a whole can help out. Playing with a range of people is always fun and it can be geared around the curriculum, using historical figures or mathematical equations. This game works well later in the semester, as well, when reviewing material. For example, I once assigned each student a different playwright that we had studied and they had to circulate around and figure out who was who. It helped the students attach the plays to the playwrights and remember what was unique about each figure.

***Charades (minimum of 10 minutes).*** Everyone knows charades, but think about how you can adapt this to introduce your specific discipline. This past semester I was so disenchanted with the thought of going over my attendance policies once again that I decided to play Syllabus Charades. I made up mock headlines like “Crazed Co-ed Cries, ‘Three Absences and You’re Out!’” and gave them to small groups of students to act out. I also added some tabloid headlines (my favorite was “Vegan Vampire Attacks Trees”) to spice things up. I think it’s best to have small groups of students act these out for the rest of the class rather than to have individual students act alone. The small groups don’t put individuals on the spot as much and get people working together. You can vary the groups each round so that everyone gets to work with different people. Of course, you’ll need to review the basic rules of charades and allowable gestures. This game can also be used later in the semester as a way to review or reinforce ideas.

### **Involve Students Physically**

As Jensen argues, kinesthetic learning can be an important tool in student success. The word “kinesthetic” comes from the Greek, meaning sensation through movement. In kinesthetic academics, students use their bodies to learn. Getting students to move can also refocus and energize them, so I try to do something physical with my students nearly every class. This doesn’t mean that we have to run laps around the classroom; just having students

change their position in their seats can help.

Here are two simple exercises that involve physical movement. For each exercise, I will demonstrate how you might adapt this activity for a literature class, a history class, and a chemistry class.

**Statues.** This is a very simple exercise and one of my favorites because of its versatility. The basic concept is simply to have students create living statues with their bodies. You can have the students create their own statues or have them “mold” another student if the comfort level is high. The game has endless variations. You can use props, work from a picture, work in small groups, and so forth. The game can be a short, freeze-frame spontaneous movement or an activity that requires some preparation. I’ll detail two different ways to use this basic concept and encourage you toward creating other variations of your own.

*Variation one:* I have students start with a picture, diagram, or other document, framed around the curriculum. The image might be a photograph of a person, an event, or a work of art. It could be a diagram of a chemical reaction or a physics formula. It can be realistic or representational. I give students three to five minutes to study the image and then create with their bodies a still representation of it. I encourage students not just to mimic what they see on the page but to recreate the essence of it. Once they have found a comfortable frozen position that is representative of their image, I walk through the “museum” that has been created. I usually divide the class into two groups for this so that everyone gets to participate and observe. We then discuss what we have seen, helping the students to absorb the main points of the lesson.

*Literature Class.* Divide the class into two groups (8 to 12 students per group). Ask both groups together to read a short section of text aloud. I like to “popcorn read,” having one student begin to read spontaneously and then stop as he or she wishes, with another student then jumping in and picking up the thread until we have finished the section. Sometimes this takes a little side-coaching at first to get a smooth flow, but once the students get used to it I find that they tend to listen more carefully and be more involved with this style of reading than when I do a set pattern. (You can also call out students’ names to have them read if they aren’t comfortable picking it up on their own.) Next, ask each half of the class to work together to form a picture of what they have just read. Ask one group to represent a realistic portrait that focuses on the main event of the passage, and ask the other group to create an abstract portrait that focuses on the feel of the passage and what it evokes. Give the groups about three minutes to complete the picture. If the groups are getting bogged down with too

much discussion, you can make this a silent activity, allowing them only to communicate by nonverbal means. When the time is up, each group should freeze in the portrait position. Let each group in turn unfreeze and explore the other group. Then lead a discussion of the major points that arose in the pictures and connect it back to the text and author.

*History Class.* Divide the class into groups (5 to 6 students per group). Give each group a picture or painting from the historical time period or event that you are studying. Ask each group to come up with a brief “slide show” that tells the story of the image in four still frames. Give all the groups about three minutes to plan out their slides. (If they get stuck with the planning phase, have them do the nonverbal version as explained above.) Watch each group’s “slide shows” in turn, having each group call “scene” when their picture is set, hold it for five counts, and then move to the next frame. Discuss what each group discovered about the event and how they interpreted it. You can have them adjust and reshow their pictures for historical accuracy, if needed.

*Chemistry Class.* Divide the class into three groups (6 to 8 students per group). Give each group a diagram of a type of reaction. One group can represent acid-based reactions, a second group can represent precipitation reactions, and a third oxidation reactions. Each group has about four minutes to create a slow-motion picture of the reaction. Students must be specific and detailed in how they present the reaction, so encourage them to embody each part of the reaction and to be as expressive as possible. Groups should also be required to include each student as they demonstrate each step of the reaction. You can assign specific reactions to each group or leave it up to them to decide. Once the groups have all shown their reactions, you can lead a discussion with the class and see what (if any) changes might be needed and have the students reenact the reactions, if needed.

*Variation two.* This is the short and spontaneous version of the exercise. Begin by having the students walk around the room. Encourage them to focus only on themselves and not to interact with others. As they walk, you clap your hands and call out words. Based on these words, the students immediately strike poses and then freeze. The words called out can be chosen from the curriculum and include people, places, or concepts. Basically, you are asking students to articulate with their bodies what you want them to understand in their minds. To do this, you have students form statues of mathematical equations, sentence structures, important inventions, and so forth. The choices are limitless as long as you can think creatively about the topic. Here are a few suggestions for the three disciplines we have been exploring:

*Literature Class.* Let's say that you are reading Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. You could call out "Hester Prynne," "Roger Chillingworth," "Pearl," "Arthur Dimmesdale," or other characters. The students are then to snap into whatever poses are evoked by these characters. Encourage them just to go with their first impulse and make clear physical choices. There is obviously no right or wrong with this exercise; it's all about how each person experiences the ideas. After students have interpreted a few characters, if time permits, you can pick out a few students to show their poses. You can use the pictures of the characters to touch on issues in the novel. To review authors from a specific unit or period, you could call out the names of the authors or their important works and follow the same scenario.

*History Class.* You can run this exercise as a warm-up when reviewing for an exam. Call out terms or people from the chapters such as "John Smith," "Mary Jemison," "Pennsylvania Charter," and "Indentured Servant." If you want to get tricky, you can call out a date and see who can form a snapshot of what happened on that date. Remind students that they can just react spontaneously to the term or person. The important thing is that they make a physical connection. This also helps students become aware of which people and terms they know and which ones they may need to study more closely.

*Chemistry Class.* This exercise explores states of matter. You can call out, alternatively, "liquid," "gaseous," or "solid." Start with having students create still freezes and then have them become particles, moving around the room in the way that the particles in the different states would. Remind them of how they should behave, if needed; if you see students moving past each other when they should be a solid, you can have them adjust their movement. You might also add plasmas or Bose-Einstein Condensates or experiment with phase changes by calling out "water" and then different temperatures, so that students must change the state of the water as is appropriate to the phase changes that you call out.

***What Are You Doing?*** This one may sound complicated, but it is actually quite simple and brings some fast-paced fun into the classroom. To begin, divide students into two lines, line A and line B, facing each other single file. One person from each line steps forward. Person 1 from line A asks person 1 from line B, "What Are You Doing?" Person B1 responds with a suggestion that is connected to the theme or topic for the round. For example, if you want to explore the parts of speech, you could do a round for each part. If the first theme is adverbs, person B1 might respond with, "I'm running very *slowly*." Person A1 then acts out the suggestion given

to them by person B1. Person B1 goes to the back of line B, and the next person in line B steps forward. Person B2 asks A1, “What Are You Doing?” While continuing to act out the original suggestion (running slowly), person A1 comes up with a new suggestion based on the topic, such as “I’m *furiously* eating chocolates.” Person B2 begins *furiously* eating chocolates, as person A1 goes to the back of line A and the next person in line A steps forward. The round continues until the topic is played out. With this game, encourage students to be as physical as possible and to remain active with their suggestions. Keep the pace quick and this can be both a mental and physical workout. The topics can be connected to your discipline and geared towards teaching whatever concepts you wish.

*Literature Class.* This is fun for exploring specific novels or authors. Start with a round on Poe, for example. Person 1 from line A asks person 1 from line B, “What Are You Doing?” Person B1 might respond with, “I’m luring Fortunato into the catacombs.” Person A1 acts this out. Person B1 goes to the back of line B and B2 steps forward and asks A1, “What Are You Doing?” While continuing to act out the initial suggestion, person A1 says, “I’m listening to a Raven” and so forth. When this suggestion has played out, focus on a different author. You could also focus on specific novels. This game is an effective way to lead into a discussion of action in novels or to examine specific characteristics of authors.

*History Class.* This is a useful structure for exploring events or the daily life of a specific time period. For example, you might start with Ancient Greece. A1 asks B1, “What Are You Doing?” B1 responds with, “I’m competing in a foot race.” Person A1 acts out a foot race. B2 steps forward and asks A1, “What Are You Doing?” While continuing to compete in a foot race, A1 says, “I’m fighting in the Peloponnesian War.” This might be a good wrap-up exercise with each unit. If this exercise is repeated throughout the semester, students will perform better each time.

*Chemistry Class.* This game works well for exploring the periodic chart. You could focus solely on the elements or open it up to periodic trends or properties. A1 asks person 1 from line B, “What Are You Doing?” Person B1 might say, “I’m binding to a nucleus.” Person A1 binds to a nucleus. B2 steps forward and asks A1, “What Are You Doing?” A1 responds with, “I’m melting Neon” and so forth.

### **Involving Students Vocally**

Involving students in oral communication can be as simple as having them read a passage aloud in class. There are many ways to engage students in discussion, but these games approach vocal involvement on a slightly larger

scale. These structures focus on critical-thinking skills and help the students to use their knowledge in an active way.

**Talk Show.** For this activity, you set up a talk show panel on a certain topic. The panel of guests can be characters from a book or from history or experts on a particular subject (patterns of organization, ways to research, formulas, etc.) You can do this as an in-class exercise with no previous preparation by the students, or you can assign students a particular topic ahead of time. Students not participating in the actual panel can come up with questions to be answered by the panel, and you get to be the talk show host. (And only you can decide if you are more of a Jerry Springer than an Oprah.)

*Literature Class.* This is perfect for exploring a novel in greater depth. Let's use George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as an example. Assign students to be Napoleon, Snowball, Mr. Jones, Major, Squealer, and so on. Have the students not assigned a role to come up with three or four questions for the panel. You might assign specific students the creation of questions for specific characters so that all characters have questions addressed to them. Ask the students to come up with open questions rather than closed ones that could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Then, collect the panel and start the exercise by acting as the talk show host. You can address all the questions to the panel members yourself or ask the students with the questions to ask them directly. For example, the discussion might begin as follows:

Instructor/Host: "Welcome to the Sullivan Show! This week you're in for a special treat as we get to talk to the animals." (Introduce the panel). "To get things started I think that we have a question from the audience."

Student/Audience Member: "Yeah, uh Snowball, I was wondering how you respond to the allegations that you caused the windmill to collapse?"

As host, you can ask follow-up questions and coax more detailed answers from the panel, but if you have a few enthusiastic students, this activity often takes off quickly. The audience usually gets involved by reacting with boos or cheers to the answers. The more you can encourage the whole class to embody the world of the talk show, the more fun you can have with this structure.

*History Class.* You might explore contrasting ideas of history with this structure. You can lay the groundwork but look at different perspectives on a historical event by having members of the panel be advocates of particular points of view. For example, if you want to explore the Civil

War, you could compose a panel of a Confederate soldier, a Union soldier, Dorothea Dix, a couple of soldiers' wives, General Grant, General Lee, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln, Stonewall Jackson, and so on. Have the class come up with questions that explore different viewpoints on these persons. You might select one or two questions that all of the panelists must answer by giving it to them in advance so they can prepare the answer. If you want to turn this into a small-group activity, you can have students work in groups of three to four to research the characters. One student from each group would then be chosen to play on the panel in class.

*Chemistry Class.* With this game, you might have students to explore different careers in chemistry or important scientists or leaders in chemistry throughout history. (And you can always go with the more fantastical, to have students embody starch, sulfur, iron, etc.) Taking the career example further, you could have every student in the class create a character that has a career in chemistry. One student might be Frankie the food scientist and another Paul the paper maker. Each student would research the career and give a prepared description of it. You could ask follow-up questions and even have the different characters ask each other questions, as well.

*Freeze Tag.* This is basically a group role-playing activity. Ask two students to act out a scenario. Whenever the scene begins to falter or stagnate, another student should yell "freeze" and tag one of the two students out. The new student takes the place of the student just tagged, and the scene continues. The new student can continue with the character of the person just tagged out or come in as a new character. You should be ready to yell out "freeze" yourself at first to get things moving. The most successful role playing usually occurs when the students have enough concrete information to form a solid base for the scene but enough freedom to have fun with the topic. You can use suggestions from the class to help form your base. For example, if you are discussing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you might start with a scenario involving physiological needs (a desert island, a clothing factory, etc.) Ask the students where a scene focusing on physiological needs might take place. Ask them next for a relationship that two people might have in that location (captain and passenger, employee and employer, etc.) Then have the first two students start the scene, "You are shipwrecked on a desert island. You are the captain of the ship, and you are a passenger who was on board." You can direct them from there and follow up with a discussion of the theme after the scene goes a few rounds.

*Literature Class.* The possibilities here are endless. You can have students play characters in novels they have read but put the scenes into their

own words. This is great for making Shakespeare or other older works more accessible. For example, you might do a series that focuses on *Romeo and Juliet*. You could set it up as a teenage girl arguing with her mom about the boy she wants to date (Lady Capulet/Juliet scene). As the scene plays out, call “freeze” and ask another student to go in as the mom’s friend (Nurse and Lady Capulet); in the next freeze, switch it to Nurse and Juliet, Juliet and Romeo, Romeo and Tybalt, and so on. You can also not call the freezes and let the student develop the scenes as they will, or do a combination of both, by starting with a few freezes you have planned and then letting them select.

*History Class.* Pick an event in history that you would like to explore more fully. Let’s take the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. You could chronicle the events of the fire and follow through the investigation and reform that followed. You might set up the first scene with two immigrant girls going to work, talking about their boyfriends. Then, you could freeze the scene and jump forward in time to just after the fire, to show that one girl from the first scene survived and one didn’t. The next scene could be the survivor talking to the police, the next the police talking to a department of labor inspector, the next the labor inspector testifying with a lawyer, and so on. Here, too, you can start it and then let the class go where they will, adding characters and developing the situation. Before playing, you could also brainstorm a list of potential characters and scenes and write them on the board for students to refer to during the exercise.

*Chemistry Class.* The idea for this variation comes from the work of John P. Walters who won the 2002 Robert Brasted Award for his innovative pedagogical approach using role-playing techniques to teach analytical chemistry. He has since retired, but his work is continued by Paul Jackson who has written several articles on the techniques. Walters used role playing throughout the entire semester, but here I am adapting one of his ideas for use in a shorter format. This is similar to a murder mystery game but instead of solving a murder, the class works together to come up with a solution to a dilemma. You could use this first part of the game on its own to explore various roles in real-life chemistry situations, or you could use this as an introduction to a lab experiment with the scenes leading to the class designing a lab that would solve the problem. To start things off, come up with a dilemma that might occur in business or industry and that can be solved using chemistry. For example, Walters offers this one:

A classic assembly line crisis has occurred. A pill coating machine has either malfunctioned, or the pill mix has been adulterated. The only evidence of what could have happened are few tenths of a

gram of “shiny” bronze-like, metallic shavings. If the shavings are portions of an adulterant, then the entire assembly line must be shut down, a day or two layoff of the next shift done, throwing people out of work and leading to probable employee grievances. If the shavings are, however, portions of a standard bronze alloy, then the problem is more likely from a bronze bearing or bushing failure. The objective is to determine if the shavings are from standard bronze alloys, or not.

You could set the students up with specific roles such as the company Chief Executive Officer, the company public relations director, the assembly line manager, the assembly line operator, a company engineer, the packaging division manager, and, of course, the company chemist. Give each student a little prep in terms of his or her stance and role in the scenario. For example, the packaging division manager should know that he or she would be upset if the assembly line had to be shut down since it would cause layoffs in his or her division; the assembly line operator should know that he or she was the one to discover the problem and be able to give the details of what happened, and so forth. Assign a student to be the investigator who will question each person and start the scenes. Each scene would be between the investigator and one of the other roles you have assigned. At the end of the scenes, the class should work together to design a lab that will solve the problem. In this case, the lab would involve testing the shavings to determine their composition. If you are interested in the whole lab as designed by John P. Walters, you can find an extensive write up online (Walters.)

### **Putting It All Together**

There is, of course, a time and a place for everything. Some disciplines are taught most effectively by a didactic approach, and some classrooms call for a more authoritative style. As experts in our respective fields, each of us must be the judge of which teaching methods will most effectively reach our students. At the end of their research, Grubb and Worthen come to the conclusion that good teaching cannot be simply labeled. In other words, one can't say that didactic teaching is bad or that active teaching is good. Good teaching involves a multitude of factors, and there is no single method that will work for everyone in every class or with every subject. What Grubb and Worthen conclude does work is working together: “We conclude then that good teaching is inescapably collective” (361).

If you plan to try these exercises, realize that you must be thoroughly prepared, with clear ideas and goals in mind so that you can

easily direct the students toward effective discoveries. If you only have a vague idea of what you want to accomplish, you will probably not get the best results. I encourage you to allow the students room to explore and discover on their own while you are a well-informed guide to help them through the process. Also, you must model the type of behavior that you want your students to enact. If you are energized, they will be more open to becoming energized. If you are animated and spontaneous, they will be encouraged to follow in like manner.

I hope that these structures suggest some new ideas and activities to try in your classes. I consider it important to take risks and not to fear failure or looking foolish. As I say to my students, “Embrace your inner idiot.” It can lead us to a wiser place.

*Kerrigan Sullivan is an assistant professor of theatre and serves as department chair for visual and performing arts at John Tyler Community College.*

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