

It Begins with Play



chapter
ONE



It all begins with the concept of play.

When we think of play, it is often associated with small children in preschool classrooms—building with blocks, dressing up, holding tea parties with stuffed animal guests, playing house, recreating stories, acting out vocations such as firefighter, police officer, grocery store cashier. But as students progress through school, play makes way for the more important business of learning core subjects: reading, writing, and arithmetic. If play is given any time, it is as a break from hard work. Play must be earned and is quickly withheld as a consequence of not completing enough real work.

The famous early childhood educator Maria Montessori had different ideas about play. She argued that play was work; it is the work of children and is

central to child development. According to Montessori, children learn best when they are active, and therefore they should have a variety of play experiences in the content areas of mathematics, language, and science as well as social relations with peers. Play links sensory-motor, cognitive, and social emotional experiences. Play is the optimal setting for brain development. Play fully develops the complex and integrated brain, so essential for learning throughout childhood and adulthood. In short, play forms the foundation for a fulfilling life.

MONTESSORI'S CONNECTION BETWEEN PLAY AND LEARNING

To further examine the connections between play and learning, let's look at Montessori's notions (1995) about play. Montessori defined the essential dimensions of play as:

- Being voluntary, enjoyable, purposeful, and spontaneous
- Expanding creativity by using problem-solving skills, social skills, language skills, and physical skills
- Helping to expand on new ideas
- Supporting the child in adapting socially
- Serving to thwart emotional problems

From this list of essential dimensions of play, we can easily discern that play is a conduit for learning.

SPOLIN'S CONNECTION BETWEEN PLAY AND LEARNING

Montessori's ideas about play and learning are echoed in the work (1986) of Viola Spolin. She was a foundational creative theorist for what we now refer to as improvisation, a highly structured form of theater based on games. Like Montessori, Spolin argued the merits of play for learning and social interaction among peers. Originally trained as a settlement worker and having studied at Neva Boyd's Group Work School in Chicago, Spolin was heavily influenced by her mentor's innovative teaching, which promoted social interaction. Spolin created theater games with a powerful commitment to the idea that play develops spontaneity and communication within an ensemble of players, communication with the audience (who are themselves part of the game), and

problem-solving skills. She asserted that learning the games is a process of problem solving, not a process of students receiving information from a teacher. Through theater games, children learn how to play and develop skills in focus, concentration, self-expression, creativity, problem solving, and more.

In Spolin's view, play:

- Develops and demands focus that prompts our physical and mental state to merge.
- Creates a game having a specific problem to be solved. Players engage intuitive energy through improvisation and develop problem-solving skills.
- Prompts the merging of action and thought to solve a problem.

Throughout this book, we discuss the many teaching and learning connections to improvisation theater games. Without doubt, there are a great many more to be discovered. We think that Spolin summarized it best: "Theater games are a process applicable to any field, discipline, or subject matter which creates a place where full participation, communication, and transformation can take place" (1974).



WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO PLAY?

If play is the conduit for learning, what happens after preschool? Play is often lost in the educational agendas, and what preschoolers think of as play gets split into two categories: “recess” and the more serious, academic-sounding “fine arts,” which includes visual arts, music, and drama. Most states have laws mandating recess and physical education, acknowledging that children need this kind of play for good health. But the fine arts rarely receive such support. Because fine arts are often misperceived as “soft” subjects, they are often the first to be sacrificed when budgets are tight. In this volume, we present ample evidence to support the assertion that this utter disregard for the arts is misguided, because the arts are central to the proper development of cognitive and social skills.

This disregard for the importance of the arts in our lives isn’t restricted to children. People of all ages have lost their connection to the arts, because most consume far more art than they create. A century ago, people had more opportunities to sing together than listen to professional musicians, more opportunities to tell stories than watch them, more opportunities to create something visually pleasing such as a quilt or a woodcarving than purchase one. In this digitized age, we buy our music, we buy our stories, we buy our images. We have fewer occasions for simple artistic expression and therefore fewer experiences of the authentic communication that comes from participation in the arts. As a result, we are drifting farther and farther away from one of our most essential needs as human beings: to create.

Like any field of knowledge, the arts are a way to understand ourselves and our world. Like any discipline, be it biology, composition, or geometry, the arts have rules and rigor that a participant must engage in and master in order to be successful. All of the arts require content knowledge; discipline; practice; collaboration; and critical, analytical, intuitive, and creative-thinking skills.

Theater is no different from any of the other arts, and improvisation is a specific discipline within the broader context of theater study. At its core, improvisation taps into our deepest, most elemental urges: the desire to play, pretend, and connect. Theater games satisfy our desire to make real what exists in our imagination, whether what we imagine is a fantastic spaceship, or the memory of our grandmother’s smile, or the sensation of walking through freshly fallen snow. Improvisation quells a longing we all harbor: to gather round the fire at nightfall and share our experiences. The art form is as old as humanity; it has

roots in the first time someone tried to communicate through acting out, rather than explaining, something that happened.

Improvisation also develops our ability to create and share information. One of Spolin's objectives in developing her theater games was to help children develop the skills necessary to perform scripted material. Her son, Paul Sills, the creator of Story Theater and the first director of The Second City, used his mother's work as a foundation for creating content, leading to his own exciting and innovative work in the theater.

In the five decades since Sills directed his first show for The Second City, improvisation has become virtually synonymous with spontaneous, cutting-edge comedy. In Chicago alone, many theaters and schools of improvisation have sprouted up and flourished alongside Second City, most notably iO Theater, founded by Second City alumnus Del Close and Charna Halpern, and the Annoyance Theater, founded by Second City alumnus Mick Napier. As a result, the art form of improvisation has grown since Spolin, with new games and new philosophies and new ideas. Spolin, who encouraged growth, said, "Theatre techniques are far from sacred. Styles in theater change radically with the passing of years, for the techniques of theater are the techniques of communicating. The actuality of the communication is far more important than the method used. Methods alter to meet the needs of time and place" (Spolin, 1999, p. 14).

It is in this spirit that Second City embarked on bringing improvisation into the classroom.

WHY IMPROVISATION WORKS IN THE CLASSROOM

As we have discussed, the arts take their place among all academic disciplines governed by rules and rigor. Meaningful study of improvisation requires:

- Content knowledge
- Discipline
- Collaboration
- Social interaction
- Practice
- Critical thinking skills
- Analytical thinking skills

- Intuitive thinking skills
- Creative thinking skills

Aren't these the kinds of skills that we need to teach in schools so that students can become active participants in our democratic society?

Improvisation is an ideal pedagogical strategy for teaching and learning because it has both inherent structure and flexibility. The inherent structure stems from the rules of each game and the process of problem solving that players must apply to achieve a satisfying experience in playing the game. Flexibility stems from simplicity; no props, scenery, costumes, lighting are required. The players create everything that is needed from their own imagination.

It is this paradoxical nature that makes improvisation a useful tool for developing excellent writers, actors, and thinkers. In this stripped-down, bare-bones dramatic form, there is no limit to what the imagination can conjure into being; yet the form demands specificity, clarity, and logic if it is to be meaningful to the audience. The students are the authors, actors, and audience of work that melds body, voice, and mind through the shared experiences of the players on stage.

THE SECOND CITY CONNECTION

For nearly fifty years, The Second City did not have an ongoing presence in the educational community. Four years ago, we decided to change that. The Second City already had in place a very successful training center with a full range of classes for adults as well as children. Over the years, individual educators had asked us to develop short workshops for their students, but we wanted to do more. Through our experience working with adults as well as children, we knew that the study of improvisation could transform how people interact with the world around them.

Improvisation is deceptively simple. Quick workshops can provide an exciting and stimulating introduction to the work, but to reap the real benefits of improvisational training requires deeper commitment. Therefore, we wanted to create programs that would foster an ongoing relationship with the educational community. We felt we had a lot to offer teachers and students by sharing our expertise on improvisation exercises and techniques. We also felt we had a lot to learn from the educational community. We wanted to take on the challenge of exploring new applications for this work, adapting methods to suit those applications.

Through a series of discussions, we kept coming back to a core principle that guides the work at The Second City, in training center classrooms and on our professional stages: the ensemble creates the experience, moment to moment, in an ongoing process of discovery.

Our path was clear: to treat each classroom community as an ensemble. We would begin our work with the teachers, sharing wonderful tools and beginning a dialogue with the people who best understand students' needs and curriculum requirements. Through this dialogue, we would enter into a true collaboration with classroom teachers, who are in ongoing authentic relationship with the children who spend their days in their company.

From our first pilot workshop with teachers, we knew we were on the right path. The teachers responded with enthusiasm and creativity and opened our eyes to how these exercises can be used to enhance learning exploration, imagination, and the classroom community. From these initial pilot workshops, The Second City Training Center developed The Second City Improvisation for Creative Pedagogy professional development workshops for teachers. The training center also developed an artist-in-residence program that places a member of the center faculty in a classroom to work closely with the teacher in finding ways to use improvisation best suited to the needs of that particular group of students.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Building on Viola Spolin's original improvisation games and games taught at The Second City Training Center, this book explores the connections of improvisation to teaching and learning. Improvisation is profoundly effective in developing a number of skills:

Listening

Following directions

Focus

Oral communication

Team building

Empathy

Self-awareness

Self-efficacy
Self-confidence
Critical and creative problem solving
Idea generation

In addition, teachers who have used improvisation in their classroom have discovered that these exercises are infinitely adaptable.

Chapter Two draws on the Second City's commissioned research study of its educational programs; additional work by educational researchers such as Betty Jane Wagner, Jeffrey Wilhelm, and Dorothy Heathcoate; recent published connections between kinesthetic learning experiences (such as improvisation) and recent brain research; and other sources to show evidence that improvisation is a vital teaching tool that has significant impact in a traditional educational setting.

The majority of the book details a variety of specific improvisational exercises and gives examples of how they may be adapted for specific K–8 classroom learning experiences in the content areas of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. These examples demonstrate that improvisation can be used to teach content, build classroom community, and develop cooperative learning skills. Descriptions of improvisational games are followed with examples of lessons that classroom teachers developed at The Second City Improvisation for Creative Pedagogy professional development workshops. The lesson plans incorporate strategies and elements of curriculum differentiation, the theory of multiple intelligences, and current methodology in best practices for classroom learning. All of the lessons are linked to current expectations of Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (MCREL) and the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The Second City is breaking new ground in creating links between improvisational techniques and classroom teaching of subject areas other than drama. This book is exceptional in that it offers educators of all content areas a variety of lessons and strategies that connect improvisational exercises to teaching through practical examples of kinesthetic and authentic learning activities.

References

Montessori, M. (1995). *The absorbent mind*. New York: Holt.

Spolin, V., quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1974.

Spolin, V. (1986). *Theater games for the classroom: A teacher's handbook*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Spolin, V. (1999). *Improvisation for the theater: A handbook of teaching and directing techniques* (3rd ed.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

