Librarians as Improvisers: An Improvisational Approach to Teaching Information Literacy

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Improvisation in the Classroom

The classroom is a dynamic environment. Effective teachers must be attentive and adapt as necessary. Instructional librarians share these challenges with other teachers. Beyond responding directly to questions, they must anticipate and perceive students' underlying needs and address them. But regardless of their preparation and level of expertise on a topic, they may not foresee every need and question that might arise. Teachers sometimes refer to so-called "teachable moments," unplanned opportunities in which students are particularly receptive to explanations or demonstrations of key concepts, or to an application of particular skills. Good teachers are flexible, so as to make the most of such opportunities.

Most teachers improvise to some extent in the classroom. Even so, certain misconceptions about improvisation may lead some teachers to believe it is counterproductive or that they could risk failing to meet their objectives. But used appropriately, improvisation skills may in fact enable teachers to address key learning outcomes more successfully and meaningfully, and in the contexts of particular classes. Improvisation can allow teachers to trust their own knowledge and abilities, while adapting to the environment and responding spontaneously when required.

Improvisation is especially valuable in environments that require adaptability, responsiveness, problem solving ability, and collaboration. Interested scholars and practitioners draw attention to aspects of flexibility, creativity, and spontaneity found in improvised performance. Besides being an important dimension of teaching in general, improvisation is compatible with the prevailing goals, methods, and trends of information literacy instruction.

For many years, educators have characterized teaching as performance. In this metaphor, teachers are likened to actors on a stage and students are likened to an audience. Recent scholarship modifies this metaphor to one of teaching as improvised performance. In addition, it suggests moving beyond metaphorical analysis, to identifying and developing specific improvisation skills as they apply to teaching.

Improvisation is integral to everyday life; however, to apply it purposely and effectively requires preparation and the development of an environment that welcomes it. It works best and most easily within a "culture of improvisation," which can be developed and nurtured. Professional improvisers understand and apply certain principles that make spontaneous group performances possible. They practice their skills regularly and try to cultivate and sustain an environment that fosters improvisation. Individuals and organizations that aspire to develop an improvisational culture in their work frequently employ training from professional groups.

This interactive session on improvisation was presented in the context of these trends. The goals of the session were to introduce basic concepts of improvisation, provide participants an opportunity to experience them through practice, and explore applications in the classroom. An introductory experience with improvisation may encourage participants to use these tools more purposefully in the classroom.

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Improvisation Basics

The essence of improvisation may be found in the principles that experienced improvising groups use in their performances. Those principles can be stated in different ways; the interactive session outlined and focused on five basics that present an easily understood, practical way of thinking about the process. These basics are:

- *Paying Attention* - Listening, observing, remembering, being in the moment.

- *Acceptance* - Accept other people's viewpoints; always try to start from and/ or work toward common ground.

- *Teamwork* - What everyone can do together exceeds what any of us can do individually; borrow from the strengths of others, and lend your skills to help those around you.

- *Commitment* - Give it your all; follow through; finish what you start.

- *Having Fun* - Find the joy in what you do, and look for it every day.

The Interactive Session

The interactive session at the LOEX Conference in Dearborn consisted of a 60-minute workshop that focused on participants learning fundamental improvisation techniques and exploring their uses in teaching information literacy concepts and skills. The session consisted of brief explanations of improv principles and a series of four hands-on exercises. Each activity presented opportunities for participants to experience and practice improvisation skills, and to gain confidence in improvising in the classroom. Following each activity, participants and facilitators made observations about the experience and suggested connections to the classroom.

The session began with brief comments from the facilitators, intended to prepare and help guide participants and provide context. Comments centered on the dynamic nature of the classroom and recurring needs for teachers to adapt to unexpected and changing situations, and to respond to students in the moment. They also noted certain trends and challenges in information literacy instruction: active learning, constructivist teaching, and collaborative learning, all of which might benefit from an improvisational approach. All participants engaged in two warm up activities. Following each one, they noted the use of improv basics and discussed a few lessons they learned. After the warm-up, the group proceeded to the four exercises.

Exercise 1. The first exercise was *Word-at-a-Time Story*. The goal of this exercise was to improvise a coherent story as a group, based on a suggestion, with each participant offering a single word at a time. When prompted for a story topic, one participant offered "Harry Potter," and the activity began. As the group members took their turns, the story progressed. Char-

acters included Harry, Harmony, Hermione, and some dragons. The plot involved a lot of drinking of tequila shots in a bar, and partying until the characters went home. Following the story, participants observed that: everyone was engaged in the activity; everyone paid attention; participants could not plan what they were going to do, so they had to respond in the moment; and there were a few instances of "group mind," or what one person called "mind reading," in which it seemed people were thinking the same thing at the same time.

Exercise 2. The second exercise was *Conducted Story*. The goal of this exercise was for a group to improvise a coherent story, with each participant improvising several lines of dialogue at a time. The facilitator "conducted" the story by cuing one person to begin speaking, then changing to another person, who continued the story. The suggested topic for the story was "black bear," and each group member also had the task of working into the story a particular word or idea. Those were: panda bear, skunk, iguana, toilet, lollipop, banana, and Napoleon. During the story, there were several references, or "call backs," to earlier words, ideas, characters, and so forth. Following the story, one session participant observed that those telling the story were having fun, so the audience was engaged also. Another person noted that when they unexpectedly have to teach something for which they are not prepared, they are "more alive." Participants noted and appreciated the story ending, and its unexpected reference to one of the story elements.

Exercise 3. The third exercise was *Tag Team*. The goal of this exercise was for a group of three people to improvise an explanation of a typical information literacy concept or learning outcome. The suggested topic was "critiquing a Website." Like the *Conducted Story*, group members took turns improvising dialogue, this time consisting of parts of an explanation of the concept. Rather than being conducted by someone, players interrupted one another to take over the explanation until another player, in turn, interrupted them and took over. In its telling, the story changed into "evaluating a Website." Prompted by the facilitator, increments of dialogue became shorter. Following the story, one observer noted that, as increments got shorter, the players sped up and it got more interesting. Prompted by the discussion following the exercise, another observer voiced a general concern: "How does one handle being too energetic" while teaching? Suggestions offered by the facilitators and participants included: pay attention to the group, be aware of signals such as body language, and adjust (e.g., "bring it down") if necessary. The *Tag Team* storytellers themselves noted that they felt aware of the audience, projection, and other aspects of presentation.

Exercise 4. The final exercise was *Timmy and Lassie*. This two-person exercise is based on a cliché scenario of the *Lassie* television show, and focuses on communication and trust. In this version of the scenario, Timmy and Lassie are on opposite ends of a dilapidated bridge, and Timmy must direct Lassie to cross the bridge without falling though any of several "holes" or hitting or falling over either side. The facilitator set up a sort of obstacle course, i.e., the bridge, made of two ropes to mark the bridge sides, and several squares of cloth to rep-

resent holes. The facilitator directed one player, designated as "Lassie," to wear a blindfold and not to speak. The other player was designated as "Timmy," and was instructed to only speak in commands. During the exercise, Timmy gave commands to guide Lassie safely across the bridge (e.g., "Lassie, take one large step to your left," and so forth). In this exercise, Lassie made it about half way across the bridge before stepping on the rope. Following the exercise, participants and observers made several observations focusing on the communication. For example, one person noted the importance of being clear and concise in giving directions. Also, observers noted that vocabulary can be ambiguous; for example, a "large step" might have different meanings to different individuals. The facilitator stressed that communication is always "two-way." Though Lassie's communication was through physical response, it nevertheless was communication. This lesson is something people often forget in such an exercise, as well as in real life situations. People also commented on the audience responses, such as gasps, which became part of the group effort.

Concluding Discussion. Concluding the session, participants offered some general and specific observations and also suggested implications. One participant said that in moments where the unexpected happens, she must call on her genuine or authentic self. Another person said that she intends to utilize *Tag Team* in her classes. Others noted that the session illustrated the importance of paying attention to what is happening, having fun, and being in the moment. Others spoke about "making connections," referring to being aware of and using other people's ideas, as well as being open to "unscripted moments."

After the session, one participant confessed that she feels intimidated in teaching or in groups, and feels she is being judged. After the workshop, however, she stated that she now feels more "able to make a mistake," that is, it is all right to "fail." Others noted that the session put them "out of their comfort zone," and that that was a positive experience. A few participants said they will consider following up with teacher training in improvisation at their institutions. One participant incisively summed up an overall lesson and application to teaching, in that one can "plan the main points you want to get through" to students, and then "let the improv help get you there."

CONCLUSION

Improvisation can help librarians be flexible and respond creatively in the classroom. Improvisation skills provide librarians with valuable tools to adapt their teaching to particular environments and respond to students' needs. This interactive session allowed participants to experience the principles of improvisation in action and suggested ways to apply them in the classroom. The session demonstrated that typical instructional librarians are able to improvise as a means toward given goals. As instructional librarians develop their improvisation skills, they will be more confident and predisposed to use them in their teaching.

Each of the principles of improvisation has applications in the classroom, and together they add a powerful and creative dimension to teaching. *Paying attention*, for example, enables teachers to tune in to the class and respond appropriately to students. This awareness can help the instructional librarian perceive students' needs and address them in ways that make vital connections to learning outcomes and information literacy competencies. The principle of *acceptance* can help teachers be open to and use students' ideas and points-of-view, thus meeting them where they are instead of being frustrated that they are not where they should be. Instructional librarians can learn to accept, in a non-judgmental way, what students offer in class, and use this to move students' knowledge and skills closer to where they need to be. And librarians might even learn from the students. The principle of *teamwork* helps bring students into collaboration with one another and the teacher, so all can work together in discovery and learning. Instructional librarians can harness diverse knowledge and various skills of students, and together with their own expertise, facilitate the students' understanding and application of information literacy competencies. In teaching and learning, *commitment* to goals, processes, and one another, affects success positively. And finally, as most teachers know, *having fun* can help make learning possible. The work of instructional librarians can be hindered by certain stereotypes of librarians and libraries; creating a fun atmosphere in the classroom also can help dispel such notions and make learning easier.

As instructional librarians seek ways to engage students and energize their own teaching, improvisation skills can be valuable tools. These tools can help librarians address their predetermined learning outcomes, while also making lessons timely and relevant from the students' perspective.

APPENDIX

Selected Sources Related to Improvisation in Teaching

I. Articles About Improv in the Classroom

Lobman, C.L. (2006). Improvisation: An analytic tool for examining teacher–child interactions in the early childhood classroom. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *21*(4), 455–470.

This case study focuses on teacher-child interactions in an early childhood classroom. The researcher used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data. The author uses principles of improvisation to describe responsive and less-than-responsive teacher-student interactions. Lobman concludes that the improvisation lens is an effective tool for analyzing classroom interactions and responsive teaching. Lobman's research and perspective translate well to teacher-student interaction in other environments, including higher education.

Sawyer, R. K. (2004). Creative teaching: Collaborative discussion as disciplined improvisation. *Educational Researcher, 33*(2), 12–20.

Sawyer critiques the "teaching as performance" metaphor and discusses the common practice he calls scripted teaching. He argues that a better metaphor is "teaching as improvisational performance," since it emphasizes teacher responsiveness and creativity. This modified metaphor is particularly appropriate in characterizing collaborative discussion in the classroom. Sawyer describes creative teaching as *disciplined improvisation*, and analyzes some structural frameworks that facilitate it. He incorporates examples from both teaching and improvisational theater. He suggests using improvisational theater techniques as part of teacher training.

Sawyer, R. K. (2004). Improvised lessons: Collaborative discussion in the constructivist classroom. *Teaching Education*, *15*(2), 189-201.

In this article, Sawyer makes a case for the compatibility of social constructivist theory with improvisational theater. In his analysis, Sawyer compares constructivist teaching with staged improvisational theater. He draws from work with improvisational actors to suggest techniques to train teachers as discussion leaders who use collaborative improvisation to facilitate students' social construction of their own knowledge. He suggests that teachers learn and use theatrical improvisation skills in the classroom. Sawyer outlines the improvisation process and explains its principles using examples.

II. Books About Improvisational Theater and Techniques

Halpern, C., Close, D., & Johnson, K. (1994). *Truth in comedy: The manual of improvisation*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing.

This book is a guide to performing improvisation, particularly long-form improv comedy. It also is useful as a general handbook of basic improv principles, and includes many entertaining examples from well-known improvisers.

Johnstone, K. (1987). *Impro: Improvisation and the theatre*. New York: Routledge.

This is somewhat of a "classic" book on improvisational theater, written by a well-known authority. Though this is a book about improv, Johnstone shows great concern for creative thinking and teaching. He uses a lot of anecdotal material as illustrations.

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

Viola Spolin has been called the "grandmother of improv." Though written for teachers and directors, this classic book is useful to all actors and others interested in improv and other performance.

III. Improvisation Websites

Improv Encyclopedia http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/

This is an extensive list of improv resources, including techniques, terminology, games and exercises.

learnimprov.com http://www.learnimprov.com/

This is a repository of improvisational comedy resources. Includes improv structures and frameworks.

The Spolin Center http://www.spolin.com/

This is the Website of the Spolin Center, named for Viola Spolin, one of the originators of improvisational theater. The site has a wealth of information about improv and links to other sites.

YESand.com http://www.yesand.com/

This popular Website serves and supports the broad improv community. It includes regular features that provide news, advice, and a forum for improvisers to stay connected, share experiences, and pose questions.