

Yes-And/Or/Not: Information Literacy and Instruction Through an Improvisational Lens

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Even if we have prepared a lesson plan or any other preparation that we go through in our daily professional lives, we are thinking on our feet, acting in the moment. ... When we are solving problems, that means that we are open to the change and resistance around us and act fluidly to find solutions. (Reale, 2017, p. 8)

People are often surprised to hear that improvisers rehearse. Of course we know actors and musicians run their lines and notes until they can play them without missing any words or stage directions. But how do you practice something without a script? How can you go over something before you know what it is?

Similar questions have been raised by teachers and librarians. How do you replicate the immediacy and spontaneity of interacting with students or library users? How do you train soft skills and tacit knowledge, which are hard to express verbally and best learned by doing, in a safe, low-anxiety, accessible and inclusive workshop setting?

Since the inception of improv theater in Chicago in the 1950s, actors developed ways to rehearse these skills. By breaking down skills into component parts, they flexed and strengthened these skills like they're exercising parts of the body. Improvisers created exercises that developed "soft skills" such as adaptation, active listening, avoiding preconceived ideas, awareness, commitment, failure recovery, flexibility, focus, goal setting or resetting, innovation, making connections (both between ideas and between other people), playfulness, respect (for others as well as their choices), support of others, trust, and more. Then, after drilling and training these skills, actors put them back together in rehearsal, and finally on stage.

"Applied Improvisation" is a method that retools those activities and exercises to target and build skills for professional and real-life environments. Professional improvisers offer workshops and classes to corporations and non-profit institutions, focused on the skills they request, and lead them through activities that best develop and practice those skills. These skills are transferable to everything from business (Kulhan & Chuck, 2017) to STEM (Alda, 2017). Even those practicing law benefit from improv, such as retired judge Ken Adair (2022) and current Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson (Fisher, Marimow, & Rozsa, 2022). Although most theatrical improvisation takes place on stage in front of an audience, applied improvisation workshops focus on low-stakes, skills-focused group activities. Individuals are rarely singled out except for very short, structured moments (see "Word-At-A-Time"). Participants are not required to be clever or funny, and are instead encouraged to have fun and play. Participants are encouraged to say the first thing that comes to mind, and as such "mistakes" are allowed and even celebrated, with the caveat that fellow participants are respected.

Several librarians also found that many parts of their job are improvisational. Chu (2007), Doyle (1996) and Belben (2010) all identify concepts, principles and skills shared in improv and library work. In the last ten years, librarians have found that improv provides practical training for teamwork and leadership skills (Dohe & Pappas, 2016, 2017a, 2017b), user

services (Laredo, Maglio & Murphy, 2016), and instruction (Hosier, 2019; Markgraf, 2015; Stamatoplos, 2009, 2015, 2019; Upchurch & Westbrook, 2020). Described below is the 50-minute version of an improv workshop developed for librarians. Similar workshops may take up to two hours, depending on the amount of participants and additional topics and exercises. Some games may be cut and condensed for time; for example, the Yes-And and Word-At-A-Time exercises have been used for a short, 20-minute breakout session for new student library employee training.

Yes, And

"Yes, and," is a rhetorical formula that guides a back-and-forth dialogue between two or more improvisers (Alda, 2017; Frost & Yarrow, 2016; Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017; Seham, 2001; Wasson, 2017). "Yes" represents the reception of information you receive from someone else, while "and" represents your response that specifically builds on the information you just received. Alan Alda (2017) provides an example.

If one player says, "Look at all that water down there," and the other player completely blocks it by saying, "That's not water, that's the stage," then the scene is over. But if the player follows the principle of Yes And, he can accept what's been handed to him and add to it. "Wow, what a lot of water. Let's jump in. Let's grab onto that whale," and they're off swimming. (p. 61)

When two or more people affirm each other's ideas, rather than rejecting or disrupting them, they establish a shared reality. By contributing additional information, the participants build and expand on their ideas in new and surprising ways, exploring them and even generating new ideas. Sawyer (2004) names this phenomenon "collaborative emergence" (p. 13), in which the outcome is collectively determined by all participants, and the outcome is created by the interaction with each other. It should be noted that critical studies warn against the use of "yes" as tacit and uncritical agreement, emphasizing the importance of the concept "and" as a method of including voices that are normally marginalized in conversation (Seham, 2001, 2016).

Activity: Yes, And

The Yes-And Exercise for the workshop has participants work in groups of two or three. The first person says something they will bring on a picnic. The next person will respond with "Yes," then repeat the previous suggestion, then add, "and," followed by another item. For example:

Person A: I will bring sandwiches.
 Person B: Yes, you will bring sandwiches, and I will bring grapes.
 Person A: Yes, you will bring grapes, and I will bring chips.
 Etc.

This pattern will go on for about 30 seconds. Afterward, the group will reiterate the activity with different parameters. First, instead of simply accepting the suggestion, participants do so with a dismissive attitude. In another iteration, participants give reasons to reject their partner's items, while still attempting to

add another one. Finally, participants accept the other person's idea, not just by saying "yes, and", but by explaining in detail why the idea is important.

(A more COVID-friendly version involves participants writing the list on 3x5 notecards, and passing the cards to each other to add to different lists. Each person begins with a notecard, so many lists are active at once. While this removes the immediacy of verbal interaction, it allows participation for those who are unable to hear while wearing masks.)

Afterward, the group discusses how the exercise demonstrates concepts in interpersonal communication, collaboration and adaptability. Unsurprisingly, the final positive iteration consistently produces the best lists, with participants coming up with thematic suggestions that go well with each other. If, on the other hand, participants have a dismissive or rejective attitude, they usually struggle to come up with the next suggestion. In unofficial polling during discussion, I ask whether dismissal or rejection felt worse from both perspectives. The results are close to 50/50, but a slight edge considers dismissal worse. This may be because rejection can be cartoonish and playful ("That picnic basket is haunted!"), but also because rejection requires at least some kind of engagement. Dismissal is absolute refusal to engage.

Improvisation in Education

Students who can experiment, interact, and participate in open, playful and improvisational environments are able to learn more effectively compared to those in lecture-based instruction (Sawyer, 2004). Sawyer (2004, 2011) describes the move from lecture-based instruction to active learning in terms of a theatrical analogy: if a lecture is like an actor reciting a lesson to an audience, then an interactive lesson is like an improv performance where both the teacher and the audience participate. A teacher brings a myriad of tools to an instruction session—explanations, analogies, examples—but knowing when to use which tools requires awareness of your environment and the ability to respond productively to the situation (Stamatoplos, 2014). Both Stamatoplos (2019) and Hosier (2019) found direct benefit to their instructional skills after taking improv training. Their experience isn't unique: an experiment by Massie (2018) showed increases in college student grades after their professors took a multi-week improv workshop.

Activity: Word-At-A-Time

The Word-At-A-Time game mixes many of the improvisational skills that transfer to instruction, including active listening, collaboration and adaptation. Here, participants stand in a circle, then take turns adding one word at a time to a sentence. The group begins with a suggestion (it may be a name and occupation, such as "Penelope" and "Plumber") that informs the topic or theme. When adding a word, participants react to the words that have already been said and take the next most logical step. When a participant feels a full sentence has been completed, they can use their turn to officially end the sentence by saying "period."

(Similar to the previous activity, a variant of this game had participants writing a word on an index card, then passing the card to the next person. Each person begins with a card, meaning there are as many sentences as there are participants. Participants must react to the reality that is already on the card and write the next most logical step. Unfortunately, the opportunity to read, re-read and think removes the immediacy of the original game.)

After the game is complete, the group reflects on how the exercise demonstrates collaborative concepts. Because participants can't predict what will happen, every individual has to accept the reality of the sentence as it exists, even if they previously thought the sentence was going in another direction. This game practices de-centering, or putting aside your ego in order to contribute effectively with the group; if the sentence requires an article or conjunction on your turn, this is just as important as providing a verb or noun later in the sentence. This game makes excellent use of active listening; in every iteration I've run, everyone is hooked on every word & following every turn.

Improvisation in Information Literacy

Improvisation can also be applied to information literacy directly: empowering the user through playful information seeking and use. Playfulness, an attitude of openness and engagement, is a common concept in improvisation. While playfulness is usually associated with childhood, it has only recently been applied to adult education, especially in the context of active learning. Barnett (2011) conceptualizes playfulness as an attitude that reframes boring situations into engaging ones.

Searching for, using, and creating information are inherently improvisational (and playful) exercises. The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education (2015) occasionally uses similar language, such as flexibility and creativity, especially within the frame of Searching as Strategic Exploration. However, no known literature explicitly explores the relationship between improvisation and information literacy. While Hosier (2019) and Stamatoplos (2019) mention how improv enhanced their instructional skill, they do not apply the concepts of improvisation to the practice of information literacy, such as evaluating or searching for information.

Edwards (2020) points out that an interaction between a user and a database or online catalog can also follow the "yes, and" model. A database accepts search terms, then responds by providing information. A user paying attention to the database (affirming the reality of the situation, or "yes") can then respond with clarification of their need (contributing additional information, or "and"). The process of searching, then, involves learning how to manipulate search tools, playing with filters, and creatively developing search terms.

Explicitly using improvisational exercises to teach information literacy skills may be challenging, especially considering the limited amount of time librarians have with classes. However, using the language of improvisation can help students understand the highly contextual and complex practice of information literacy. Even presenting an attitude of being open and flexible gives students the tacit permission to play, try new stuff, and mess around without being afraid of "failure."

Two concepts the ACRL Framework (2015) specifies are divergent and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking is a process of idea generation that is closely associated with play and brainstorming (Sawyer, 2001). Proficient divergent thinking quickly develops a large cluster of varied and unique ideas. The opposing skill, convergent thinking, is not just a process of removing ideas and hoping the remaining ideas are useful. Once an array of ideas is evoked, surprising patterns can emerge and a student can make connections between ideas.

Activity: Synonyms

To practice divergent thinking, this word association game has participants go around in a circle, each person naming a synonym (as well as broader, narrower or related terms) for the

previous word. To emphasize avoiding preconceived ideas, participants should name a synonym for the previous word only, allowing the game to branch off into interesting directions. Hosier (2022, p. 25) uses a variation of the game with her students, where she always starts with the term “research”, to jump-start conversations on what students feel about research.

Activity: Random Topic Creation

To practice convergent thinking, a topic-generating exercise once again has participants go around a circle, this time with different roles. The first person selects a letter of the alphabet, and the next two people come up with different words that begin with that letter. The final person develops a paper topic integrating both words. If, for example, the letter H and the words health and hippopotamus are selected, a paper could be written on veterinary training or the benefits and challenges of hippopotamuses as emotional support animals. Parameters may be set to limit words to subject-specific concepts to explore narrower subjects.

Doing Improv Yourself

Nearly every city and university has someone trained in improvisation. Major cities have one or more theaters dedicated to improv, where people can take classes and workshops, and even join a performance group. Many universities have student groups who perform improv, and more experienced college students will be able to teach. Even some K-12 theater teachers have an improv background, and may be approached to do workshops for adults. Most teachers or coaches will charge a fee, but may have lower rates for non-profit and public sector institutions like college or public libraries. Some (inter) national resources include:

- The Improv Network is a network of improv performers, small businesses, festivals and instructors. <https://www.theimprovnetwork.org>
- The Applied Improv Network is a network of professional improv teachers and coaches, specifically designed to connect improv instructors with those looking for them. <https://www.appliedimprovisationnetwork.org>
- Markgraf (2017) runs a blog with improv games applicable to the library. <https://libraryimprov.blogspot.com>
- The Journal of Play in Adulthood has an upcoming issue on the Playful Library (Edwards, in press). <https://www.journalofplayinadulthood.org.uk>

Board games also provide opportunities to practice environmental awareness and flexibility within structure (play within rules), and have various levels of interpersonal interaction. Board games can be played in a variety of venues, such as at home with friends and family, in board game cafés, or at libraries’ board game programs. Tabletop role-playing games like D&D typically involve describing a character’s response to situations verbally or portraying them in real time, all from the safety of a dining room table. Gaming events and groups are popular at academic and public libraries, and gaming cafés are opening around the country.

Regardless of the circumstance, developing improvisational skills takes, surprisingly or unsurprisingly, practice. The point of this practice is not to become a paragon of communication or flexibility or innovation, but to become more communicative, flexible and innovative than before.

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