

# IMPROV EXERCISES AS A BACK-UP LESSON PLAN

by Patrick Shannon Fenelon

It is every substitute teacher's worst nightmare—it is your first time at a new school and you have a 60 minute Language Arts class, 25 active students, and a lesson plan that is guaranteed to last no longer than 25 minutes. If you try to stretch the lesson to fill the hour, students may become bored, making it difficult to keep the class on task. If you proceed with the lesson plan as provided, there will be 35 minutes left in class and the students may not approve of a substantially long period of silent reading. As you are not familiar with this class or this teacher's lesson plans, you may not feel comfortable starting with new material. In order to keep the class civil, and ensure that valuable learning time is not lost, what are you to do?

It's a simple solution, actually: Improvise!

No, I am not referring to developing a lesson plan on the spot; instead, I am referring to improvisation exercises. In my experience as a substitute teacher, these activities have proven quite popular with my classes, and have also saved me in instances where the lesson plan ran short. Most importantly, these activities support curricular outcomes, as students are actively engaging with speaking, listening, viewing and representing exercises.

## Where to Begin?

Knowing that not all students are familiar with improvisation, I always begin by asking if they are familiar with the television program *Whose Line is it Anyway?* This program is entirely improvised, and contains a number of improv games that are designed to produce short, comedic scenes. If students respond yes, have them explain to their classmates what the show entails. This allows students to practise speaking and listening skills, while creating a student-centred context for the activity.

The second step involves asking students what games are played on the show, developing a list together. With each suggestion, ask students to explain that game to their classmates; this allows students to make informed choices when collectively voting on which games will be played. I will also suggest games, especially in classes that are less familiar with improvisation.

After voting, have students begin warm up exercises. These can be any number of activities, including walking about the room at various speeds, adopting a character and interacting with a classmate, or vocal exercises. These activities help students develop focus, while creating an atmosphere of fun, cooperative learning.

Following the warm-up, it's time to start the activities. The key is to ensure that all students have an opportunity to participate. If students are shy, which is common, encourage their classmates to cheer them on. This supportive environment has proven beneficial in my experience, as shy students often come out of their shells and shine brightly during improvisation exercises.

If you are not familiar with improvisation and would like to try this activity, here are two of the most popular/successful games that I have tried.

## Questions Only

This has been very successful as it is quite simple to operate. Have students form two lines, with the front person in each line facing one another. These two students will engage in a conversation, but they can only speak using questions.

For example, a successful exchange sounds like this:

*Student A: How old are you?*

*Student B: How old do I look?*

*Student A: Do you really want me to answer that?*

If Student B is unable to respond within 5 to 10 seconds, or replies with a statement, they are disqualified and go to the back of their line. The next student in line continues the conversation, or asks their classmates for a suggestion to change the topic. Examples of suggestions could be locations, occupations or landmarks, and the new conversation will evolve from the chosen suggestion.

## Freeze

This game requires that you pay attention to ensure that all students have participated. Have students form a large circle and ask for three volunteers to start a scene in the middle. Again, they can ask for suggestions or develop their own scene. Once they begin their scene, they will continue until one student yells "Freeze!" At this point, that student will enter the circle and replace one of the students, who will return to the outer circle; however, instead of continuing the scene as it was before, the new student in the middle must start a new scene.

Encourage students to incorporate a lot of movement and actions into their scene, as students will be keeping a close eye for opportunities to take the scene in a new direction. For example, if a student is on the floor making snow angels, another student might yell freeze, enter the circle, and start with the phrase "Jumping jacks are MUCH easier lying down." In this instance, the same movement is being used, but in a different interpretation of the action. Encourage students to be creative, and ensure that all students participate at least once. If students are shy, have them enter the middle scene in pairs or groups of three, so that they feel less pressure.

Improvisation has proven to be quite successful in my experience. Students are actively engaging in cooperative activities, and you can truly feel a sense of camaraderie amongst classmates as they support one another. Students are also actively engaging in speaking, listening, viewing and critical thinking exercises, as they will be keenly observing their classmates and contemplating what they can add to the scene. They will also have an opportunity to tap into their creative energies. Most importantly, you can maintain classroom management in a situation that may have seemed hopeless less than an hour before. All in all, it makes for a successful day as a substitute teacher.

## Online Resources for Improv Games

- 1) <http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/>  
Provides a long list of improv games, including warm up activities.
- 2) <http://improv.ca/training/warm-ups/>  
These activities would make wonderful warm up activities to help students focus.
- 3) <http://improv.ca/training/exercises/>  
Contains a number of easy-to-understand activities.

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