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# Improvisation Within the Research and Concepts of Creative Studies

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**Improvisation: Within the Research and Concepts of Creative Studies**

The Master's Project and Explanation

by

Daniel P. Dore

### **Creative Studies + Improv = My Masters Project**

For my Masters project, I was given the advice to do something that would be fun or of interest to you. If you picked something that was of interest to you, then doing the work wouldn't seem as daunting. The hobby, or career goal, I am most passionate about is Improv, or improvising. I heard this advice, to do something of interest, a semester before I started my project. So I had plenty of time to think of how to incorporate Improv with my Masters project. As I learned in class throughout last semester, I started to see many similarities between the creative studies material and different Improv games. I'd take down notes when I saw something similar between research and one of the games. My list kept building. I realized I could incorporate all of these concepts and research and put it into the form of an improvised show. Over the summer, I'd jot down more game ideas that I'd see would relate. When I took the course this semester, I got the approval to do the show, my project, in this way. So, away we go...

### **Yes, and...**

Improvising in essence is creating a scene without a script. The fundamental rule of Improv is "Yes, and...." "Yes, and..." is the simplest form of acceptance. The fundamental rule is to accept what is given to you during a scene. Since there is no time for "re-writes," we must take what is given to us and move forward with the scene. To argue with your fellow player on what to do next in the scene, would be counter-productive. To argue with a piece of information your fellow player has just given you is counter-productive. You need to accept the information that was given to you and build off of it.

This project is not about giving every nuance of improvising, but to quickly illustrate what it's like to be counter-productive and not accept what is given would be:

Player #1: "Boy, I really love lying around at the beach. The sun's really shining today."

Player #2: "No we're not. We're lying in a laboratory."

The second player did not accept the information that was given to him (or her). It is because of that, the player and the audience can see how that would be counter-productive. Accept information and build off of it.

## Deferment of Judgment

While talking about Improv to people in the creative studies department, I tell them of the “Yes, and...” rule. After conversations with my advisor on this project, I see that this acceptance is simply deferring judgment. **The fundamental rule of improvising is the fundamental rule of divergent thinking!** This is when I realize my two worlds have collided.

Firestien (1996) states that “judgment, used at the wrong time, is one of the greatest inhibitors of creativity” (p. 61). If a player decides not to use the offer, or piece of information that you have given, it will hinder the scene. Some players try to control the entire scene, which inhibits the other player’s creativity. When one player gives an offer and the other player gives an offer, the scene may not go where it was originally intended, but that’s what makes it funny and creative and productive. De Bono (1967) states that “humor occurs when the most probable way of looking at things is disrupted by a sudden appreciation that there is another way of looking at them” (p. 142). The audience and the fellow players will appreciate what has just happened in the scene because of the acceptance of the player’s offers.

It’s the sudden anticipation. One player just said something... What will the other player do? When the audience sees how the player took one offer and built off of it, it is more rewarding for the audience, and the players as a whole. If the scene moves forward, while accepting each other’s ideas, that is how a good scene and a good comedy is made. Once the players know they can say anything and it will be accepted, they will become stronger performers. According to Firestien (1996) “the problem comes when we judge things now that we could judge later, or that we don’t need to judge at all” (p. 63). If the player has confidence that the end result will be a good scene, then the player will not have to worry about judgment during the scene. Osborn (1953) puts it best stating, “let’s stick solely to ideas – let’s cut out all criticism during the session” (p. 84). So get a suggestion and start building a scene together.

One of the seminal books on the subject of improvising is called *Impro*. On the subject of deferring judgment, Keith Johnstone (1981) states from the player’s point of view that “whatever dredges up from their unconscious I’ll accept, and treat as ‘normal’” (p. 111). I like Johnstone’s quotations around normal. What is normal? (That’s another project all together.) But from the player’s perspective, if whatever the player does is accepted as normal, the other player can also be part of this normal world, and build from that point. The great thing about Improv is that you can create your own world.

Johnstone (1981) also states that “once you decide to ignore content it becomes possible to understand exactly what a narrative is, because you can concentrate on *structure*” (p. 111). Once everyone accepts who everyone else is, then a scene can be built from there. You can then work on the structure of the scene such as the beginning, middle, end, conflict, resolution, etc.

### **The Moderator is the Facilitator**

The facilitator of a Creative Problem Solving (CPS) session and the moderator of an Improv show have the same function. Miller, Vekar and Firestien (2001) state that the facilitator is the “process expert” and is the “person (or team of people) responsible for monitoring and directing group process” (p. 9). They both help the process flow. The facilitator and moderator stay out of the content. The facilitator leaves the content up to the resource group and client. The moderator leaves the content up to the players and audience.

The moderator and facilitator are also there to explain everything going on around them during the process. Describing Linguistic Intelligence, Howard Gardner (1983) states that the facilitator or moderator will help in the “role of explanation” (p. 78). Gardner continues that “much of teaching and learning occurs through language – at one time, principally through oral instructions...or simple explanations” (p. 78). When everyone understands how the process will work beforehand, it will make the process that much more effective to execute.

### **Let Humor Flow – and Use It**

Torrance (1979) notes that “humor and a ‘sense of humor’ are basically creative and are themselves facilitative of further creativity. Almost all definitions of humor include such criteria as unusual combinations, surprise, conceptual and perceptual incongruities, and the like” (p. 188). I’m going to try my best to make it the most entertaining project and show I can. With the different scene games that we can play, I hope to cover many different styles within comedy too; such as singing, dancing, guessing games, pun and joke based games and good old-fashion scene work. Torrance reinforces that “the ability to produce humor or ‘to have a good sense’ of humor seems to be an important creative characteristic” (p. 188). It’s important to me.

### **Breakthrough – Extend the Boundaries**

With this project people can learn of the research and concepts of Creative Studies in a different way. I have devised a way that people can learn of Creative Studies in a fun and exciting way. I have taken the research and concepts and as Torrance (1979) states, I have had it “redefined for creative attack” (p. 178). I have found a way to take these learnings and integrate them within an entertaining and educational presentation of an Improv show. There may be the fundamental way of teaching and learning within the classroom. But I have found a way to change that, by showing a way to teach and learn on stage. It is also a way in which this curriculum has never been taught or learned before. According to Torrance, this is a “fundamental change within the system” (p. 178). I’m bringing the classroom to a different environment and changing the attitude with which people will learn.

### **Visualize the Inside**

This shows the research and concepts within Creative Studies, but it also shows a structure or process for each of the Improv scene games. This shows a framework that can help improvisers learn to execute each game successfully. It shows that if you're doing Improv comedy, you're not just going on stage and being funny, but it shows you how to be funny. In relation to this, Torrance (1979) states that the performer can "visualize beyond exteriors and pay attention to the internal, dynamic working of things" (p. 168). Improvising isn't just making stuff up. It's knowing *how* to make things up. With the proper framework, structure or process the person can execute with success. The content can be different, as it always will with the audience's suggestions, but the process guides the player to execute and perform successfully. The games list in this project shows you how the research and concepts can guide you through a scene.

### **What Would Be Different?**

With process and humor, William J.J. Gordon (1961) believes that "play can be disciplined and directed at will" (p. 121). With comedy or "play", Gordon also states that "it is not merely a lighthearted waste of time, but another order of constructive effort constituting in itself a serious, form-making endeavour" (p.121). There is a structure not just for each scene, but for the entire show itself. It may seem that we're making stuff up, but there is a structure for everything that the audience and players see. For this project, as in every Improv show, every show is different. All the scenes are different and all the words are different. The structure, or the process, stays the same. That's why the show's form can be replicated. The show is completely different, yet it can be strangely familiar.

Gordon (1961) further notes that the Synectics process involves "making the strange familiar" (p. 35). This is an "analytical step." The audience and players know they have seen this structure before. The content will be different, but the structure will stay the same. Gordon (1961) states that "the mind compares the given strangeness with data previously known and in general terms of these data converts the strangeness into familiarity" (p. 35). This is easily relatable to the players and the audience who have seen numerous Improv shows. When the audience sees a certain game played, they can compare it to the last time they saw that same game played.

### **Therefore...**

This show and project will be different every time it is played. Even if I used the same players and played the same games, it will always be different. The suggestions from the audience are the content which makes these shows different. Even if the performer has heard the same suggestion over many different shows, that person would just challenge him/herself to do the scene differently. We don't use scripts for a reason, to challenge ourselves creatively.

**Creative Studies  
Improv Games List**

**The Research and Concepts within Creativity**

## **Creative Studies Improv Games List (Limited Online List)**

**Composed and Researched by Daniel Dore**

### **The Game: Emotional Symphony**

**How it's played:** 3-4 players are the symphony. It can be conducted by the moderator. (It can also be self-conducted). Each player is given a different emotion. The players then make a musical composition with their emotions as their instruments. The players will also use mostly gibberish as they convey their sound to the audience.

**Research/Concept:** Emotional Hi-Jacking; Musical Intelligence; Alex Osborn

Emotional Hijacking is when you become less rational and/or logical in a flash because you are overcome by emotion. The emotion you can be overcome by can be a variety of emotions, not just negative ones. Daniel Goleman (1995) states that these “emotional explosions are neural hijackings” (p. 14). The evidence to support this deems that “a center in the limbic brain proclaims an emergency, recruiting the rest of the brain to its urgent agenda” (p. 14). People who have experienced an Emotional Hijacking realize after the moment passes, that they did not know what happened in that instance or why they reacted in such a manner (p. 14). It is a “neural takeover” Goleman states, but “not all limbic hijackings are distressing” (p. 14). This can be intense moments of joy, laughter, fear, anxiety, anger etc.

Gardner (1983) relates the work of composer Roger Sessions stating that “Sessions goes to great pains to indicate that language plays no role in the act of composition” (p. 103). In this game the beat, rhythm, and gibberish are how this symphony is executed. Language plays no role in this game.

We can train ourselves and learn to control our emotions. Osborn (1952) says we can use practice for our emotions. Osborn states that “even distinctly emotional traits can be changed by exercise” (p. 41). In this game it is the emotional traits that we are displaying.

## **The Game: Emotional Party**

**How it's played:** Scene game. Every player is given an emotion. When each player walks into the scene, each player takes on that emotion of whoever just walked in.

For the end of the scene the players can leave, and they will go back to the previous emotion.

**Research/Concept:** E. Paul Torrance; Daniel Goleman; Roger Firestien

With this game and Emotional Symphony, another Torrance (1979) creativity skill used is “Be Aware of Your Emotions.” With this skill the players can be cognitive of each other’s “emotional awareness or expression” (p.89). They can be aware of their partner’s “verbal cues” and “nonverbal cues” (p. 89).

Torrance (1979) also states that “emotional factors are also immensely important in gaining acceptance of any new idea” (p. 93). Torrance reinforces this thought relating that “those doing the ‘selling’ must not only be aware of their own emotions and feelings but they must also be intently aware of the emotions and feelings of the persons and groups to whom the new idea is being introduced” (p. 93). As in this game and every other game you need to “sell” or communicate what you are doing to your partner or group to be successful, or convey your message, as it relates to the scene.

The players will be self-aware of their emotions. Goleman (1995) states that people who are self-aware are “aware of their moods as they are having them, these people understandably have some sophistication about their emotional lives” (p. 48). The players are representing people who are of good mental health, and “while these people are often clear about what they are feeling, they tend to be accepting of their moods” (p. 48). Improvisers must accept what suggestions (emotions) they are given, and this is backed by Goleman’s views of acceptance toward a person’s changing mood.

Torrance (1988) states that one of the “abilities in the figural form” (of the TTCTs) is an “emotional expressiveness of the response” (p. 67). The players will respond to one another’s emotions and be aware of changing emotions.

Firestien (1996) states that “emotions can be powerful disrupters to clear thinking” (p. 128). In this game, the player will have to display the emotion given and still move the scene along. The player, as a person in real life, can be overcome by an emotion, or emotions, and you must learn to control those feelings.

## **The Game: Historical Ballet**

**How it's played:** Get a Historical Event and/or movie. The players dance while acting out the event or movie.

**Research/Concept:** Make it Swing, Make it Ring; Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence; Put Your Ideas in Context

This game uses Torrance's creativity skill of "Make it Swing, Make it Ring" (p. 149). One of the indicators in creative movement and dance, Torrance (1979) states, is that "movement facilitates learning and understanding of events, ideas, concepts, etc" (p. 153). This is pretty much the definition of the game, which is facilitating a ballet dance for the learning and understanding of the historical event.

This game also uses Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence. This and Breakin' share the same research, since they are both dance-based games.

Another Torrance creativity skill is to "Put Your Ideas in Context" (p. 99). Murdock and Matters (2002) synthesize Torrance's research stating that putting your ideas in context is "putting experiences together in a meaningful way; making connection between things; giving situations and ideas a history, and background, a story" (p.7). The players figure out how to create a dance and relate it to the historical event suggestion given by the audience members. Torrance (1979) states that "to communicate a new idea clearly and powerfully, a person must show its relationship to something that is known, understood, and valued by the person receiving the communication" (p. 104). The comedy of this dance works well when the players can show the audience, in a way they have never seen before, an event that they can relate to and understand. When they observe this communication and relate to it, that is when the comedy takes place.

## **Epilogue**

## **Epilogue**

Well, that's my project. I hope you enjoyed it. The most important things to remember are that if you defer judgment and follow the structure for each game, you should have success in each scene-game that you play. The research in this project shows that there is a rhyme and reason for everything. A professional improviser never goes blindly into a scene. A professional facilitator never goes blindly into a facilitation. They have process by their side. You can use and guide any content, if you know the process or rules within a situation.

## **Practice and Critique**

You need to work at and learn that process to be flowing with it. Osborn (1953) states it best that "preparation and analysis go hand in hand" (p. 135). With Improv you need to practice to know how each scene-game is played. After each show you critique to learn from what you did to get better. If you employ any of the creativity teaching tools, it takes practice to get the hang of it. We do a PPCo or PMI after to learn from our experience. You need preparation and analysis to get the most effective execution of whatever creative endeavor you are pursuing.

## **Similarities**

The relation between Improv and a facilitation go hand in hand. With Improv, everyone's involved during a show. The players are there to entertain the audience. The moderator makes sure that each scene-game is run smoothly, and the audience can give their suggestions when asked by the moderator. With facilitation, the facilitator makes sure that the process runs smoothly. The moderator gets the most out of his players and the facilitator gets the most out of his resource group. We are always there to serve the audience or client.

## **Defer to Enable a Change**

When the performers and resource group defer judgment, they will be more productive. Both can build off of other ideas by acceptance. When you accept ideas you are performing and producing as a team. When you accept the ideas, you are accepting the process. This process leads to change. The change can be what happens at the beginning of a scene and what the result is at the end of that scene. In a problem solving session, the change can be from having a challenge at the beginning of a process, then facing that challenge and working toward a solution through action. Problems are confronted in the scene and they are confronted through this facilitation. By following the process in a scene or facilitation, you work through those problems.

**In Closing...**

Creative Studies is also more than just solving problems and brainstorm sessions. Creative Studies shows the structure for everything deemed creative, whether it's related to Mel Rhodes' 4Ps of person, product, process and press (environment), to composing music or writing a screenplay or teaching in a classroom. Everyone can know and learn from the process. Everyone involved must know their role in regards to process. When the roles are respected, everything can go smoothly. When the process is followed, the results are better.

And now creatively, you're better.

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