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Improv(ing) Students: Teaching Improvisation to High School Students to Increase Creative and Critical Thinking

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Buffalo State College
State University of New York
Department of Creative Studies

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A Project in Creative Studies
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Dates of Approval:

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                                   Dr. Cyndi Burnett
                                   Assistant Professor

_____   _____
                                   Beth D. Slazak
                                   Candidate

Abstract

This project focuses on teaching High School students improvisational techniques to increase their creative and critical thinking skills. This covers tools of Creative Problem Solving, rules and concepts of improvisational theater, and affective thinking skills. The finished project includes lesson plans, a workbook, and a video that will assist students and educators in teaching these skills.

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_____
Date

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this to the people who helped me the most in life. First, I need to thank the three people who inspire me to improve myself, and without whom, I would have never tried to go beyond my comfort zone. Thank you very much James Nash, Katie Nash, and Lizzie Nash, the three best children in the world.

To be a parent of wonderful children and a graduate student at the same time takes one thing, an amazing helper. Someone who is willing to make dinners, to drive children around to their various activities, and to rub feet. All are necessary to finish a project of this level. I was very lucky to have partnered with the best man, who was willing to take this job on. Steve Slazak, as usual, this was an adventure that you made sure I could do.

From the beginning, I've had two women inspire me to reach for this level of education, my mother, Robin Woodruff, and my sister, Ginger Johnson. These two have set examples of education that I have striven for my whole life.

To all in the International Center for the Study of Creativity, students and faculty, the participants of MindCamp, and the Creativity Expert Exchange, and all who are in my tribe, thank you for helping me find my sweet spot and recognize my personal value. Also, thanks for laughing at my jokes.

Finally, my two partners in crime and chocolate, Ismet Mamnoon and Nancy Hoelzl, I hope to spend a lifetime getting into trouble with you and enjoying it.

Thank you all, it is your fault I am like this.

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Section One: Background to the Project

Purpose and Description of Project

If I could impart one piece of sage advise to the people that I meet, especially to

those still in school, it would be to defer judgment. I find life surprisingly limiting to

those trapped in their judgments of themselves, of others, and of ideas and experiences. I

have yet to see anyone benefit from being judgmental when presented with new ideas or

at the start of a growth experience and have seen many people make great strides when

they turn away from that mind set. The biggest benefit that is gained through judgment

deference is an internal change that opens the world up to you, and allows you to

experience so much more.

I struggle with this personally, as I am very judgmental of my own work. In an

effort to improve this ability in myself, and in others who may also struggle, I looked to

the practice that I felt had the strongest chance of eradicating this, improvisation. To

participate in an improvisation session, one must relinquish all judgment; from one's own

actions and the actions of others. This project would give me the experience needed to be

a practitioner of 'deferring judgment', and while I improved, I could also help others

improve. Thus began my desire to be an improv coach to students, those who I felt were

surrounded by the best energy and would be able to make lifelong adjustments early on.

The purpose of this project is to provide students with the abilities that will be

necessary for them to function most effectively in a society that is changing so rapidly for

a future world that they are creating. Every single day we are called upon to make

choices, to deal with challenges, and to overcome situations. No one is given a script for these; we have to do it "off the cuff". The ability to do this is necessary when we need to produce novel and useful outcomes, and that ability can be developed through improvisation. The desired result of this project is for students to gain creativity skills through the practice of improvisation. I propose to teach a series of classes that will give students the confidence in their ability to act creatively, and to think analytically, and the capabilities needed to do these well.

Creativity skills are improved through deliberate practice. These skills have been divided into two categories, thinking skills and affective skills as defined by Puccio, Mance, & Murdock in their book *Creative Leadership: Skills That Drive Change*. Thinking skills are more cognitive in nature, and while they do effect our behavior, they tend to be more internal, a governor of actions, rather than the result of action. The affective skills are more behavioral in nature; they exemplify an attitude or a motivation. They are as follows:

- Mindfulness: attending to thoughts, feelings, and sensations relative to the present situation.

- Dreaming: to imagine as possible your desires and hopes.

- Sensing gaps: to become consciously aware of discrepancies between what currently exists and that that is desired or required.

- Playfulness: freely toying with ideas.

- Avoiding premature closure: resisting the urge to push for a decision.

- Sensitivity to environment: the degrees to which people are aware of their physical and psychological surroundings.

- Tolerance for risk: not allowing yourself to be shaken or unnerved by the possibility of failure or setbacks.

- Tolerance for ambiguity: being able to deal with uncertainty and to avoid leaping to conclusions.

(Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011).

Corresponding to these skills are the aptitudes honed in the practice of improvisation. These tie together in many obvious and less obvious ways. The relationship between creativity and improvisation is more clearly seen when we compare the improvisational skill set and the creative affective skill set. The improvisational habits and techniques that I will instill include:

- Yes, and…:the accepting and building on of others' ideas. It requires imagination, and boldness. (Yes, and when we go to Italy, we will taste all the flavors of gelato.)

- Give the gift of information: the providing of relevant facts, and the making of brave decisions. ("Welcome Nancy, we are glad that you chose Super Smiles as your family dentist.")

- Define ambiguities: the presenting of information when others have not made these choices. ("I like that purple octopus you are wearing, it brings out the sparkle in your third eye.")

- Keep things in the present: to be aware of the timeliness in your actions.

- Listen and respond: to be aware of what is actually going on, not what you want to have happen, and making appropriate choices based on other's words.

- Show, don't tell: using actions to portray information in a casual manner. (Shivering, rather than saying "Boy, Cindy, it sure is cold out here!")

- Have an opinion: to make choices and stick with them, as strength comes from decisiveness, while being aware that there is a difference between conflict, a natural part of a story arc, and fighting.

- Have an objective: to be goal oriented, even if the goal is to stay away from hats because they are being used by aliens to read your thoughts.

- Confidence and energy: to face things with an attitude of acceptance, because shucking off an offer makes you appear to be 'cooler' than others on stage, and shows a lack of commitment. Say it and mean it.

- Who, what, where: to provide the setting, characters, and grounding activity habitually.

- Let go and play: to relax into the situation and go with whatever the flow becomes.

- Find the game: to be aware of what is happening and notice the patterns so that you contribute to them.

- Don't eat the fun; which means to avoid adding what you want to do to the scene, add what the scene needs.

- Pay attention: to be consciously aware of what is going on, so that you can participate and add, to develop the skill to notice everything.

These techniques help to build an ability to improvise quickly and successfully. They are, in fact, the building blocks of improvisation. There are many aspects of this practice that relate to the affective skills of creativity. These can be compared in

this table, which shows the relation between the affective skills and the

improvisational techniques, as described by Halpern and Del in *Truth in Comedy*

(2001), Madson in *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show up* (2005), Salinsky

and Frances-White in *The Improv Handbook* (2008) and Puccio, Mance, and

Murdock in *Creative Leadership: Skills That Drive Change* (2011).

Table of Comparison between Affective Skills and Improvisational Qualities

	Mindfulness	Dreaming	Sensing Gaps	Playfulness	Avoiding Premature Closure	Sensitivity to Environment	Tolerance for Risk	Tolerance for Complexity	Tolerance for Ambiguity
Yes, and…		X		X	X		X	X	
Give Gift of Info			X			X	X		
Define Ambiguities			X			X	X	X	
Keep Things in the Present						X			
Listen and Respond			X		X	X			
Show, Don't Tell					X	X	X		
Have an Opinion	X				X	X	X	X	
Have an Objective	X				X	X		X	
Confidence and Energy	X			X	X		X		X
Who, What, Where		X	X			X			
Let Go and Play		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Find the Game	X	X	X	X		X		X	X
Don't Eat the Fun	X				X	X	X		
Pay Attention	X		X		X	X			

(Halpern & Del, 2001) (Madson, 2005) (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2008).

This table shows the relationship specific affective skills have to individual improvisational skills. This knowledge is useful when building the curriculum for the classes. I will use this information to tailor my plans, so that suitable activities are matched with appropriate skills. The correlation between the two areas is strong, with qualities often overlapping

To implement this project, I will gather a small group of 8-12 teenagers who have no experience with any of the following; formalized Creative Problem Solving (CPS), creativity, or the study of improvisation. Through the use of games, activities, and reflection, I will open them to this experience and tie it to creativity skills, so that they will learn the relationship between the two. During each class we will participate in exercises that will engage them both physically and mentally. These will be based on improv skills. After we have reflected on individual learnings, we will discuss the relationship between these skills and the skills of creativity. They will be given the opportunity to discuss this vocally, reflect on it in writing, and share their thoughts on videotape. I expect to see their abilities in creative thinking increase as their confidence and capacity in improvisation grows.

Each class will last about ninety minutes. The students will start with a number of warm ups, for their mouths, then bodies, then minds. We will then learn a game that relates to a specific skill or rule of improv. After we have played the game, we will then debrief it, first as a group, then on their own in their books. They will acquire each of these skills through practice; understand how to use them and why they will be helpful as they enter the real world. The participants will also experience a personal growth through

these achievements. The expected benefits of this training will include increased idea generation, paradigm-breaking thinking, self-confidence, and leadership capabilities.


Rationale for Selection

My path to this project was long and winding. I originally joined the department on a whim, born out of necessity. At age 35, I went back to get my teaching certificate, so that I could support my family. When it came time to get my graduate degree, which I needed to fulfill New York State's requirements, I was done with schooling. I had recently remarried, and had three children on the cusp of teenage-hood, and knew that I could not sit through hours of boring lectures next to someone who was excited to finally be 21. As I was scanning through programs that would fulfill the state standards I stumbled upon Creative Studies. It sounded interesting to me, and I applied.

While in my third semester in the program, I was enrolled in CRS 610, Facilitation of Group Problem Solving. That semester I was passed over for a teaching position for which I was thought to be a shoo-in. I was crushed. That weekend our teacher, Dr. Firestien, had us facilitate a personal challenge for each other. The challenge that I presented was "What to be when I grow up." My confidence as a teacher had plummeted and I felt there might be something else out there that I could do, and I hoped that my classmates would help me find it.

They did, and the answer came out of the blue. They told me to go into comedy. I started to research and read up, but other than getting an Honorable Mention on 97 Rock's Last Comic Standing, I made no major life changes. Then I attended the Expert-to-Expert conference (now Creativity Expert Exchange) and sat in on Tim Swialtaski's

coaching session. He made a small, off-topic comment that started my mental wheels

turning. He drew a diagram similar to Amabile's shown here.

Figure 1: Amabile's Components of Creativity Venn Diagram
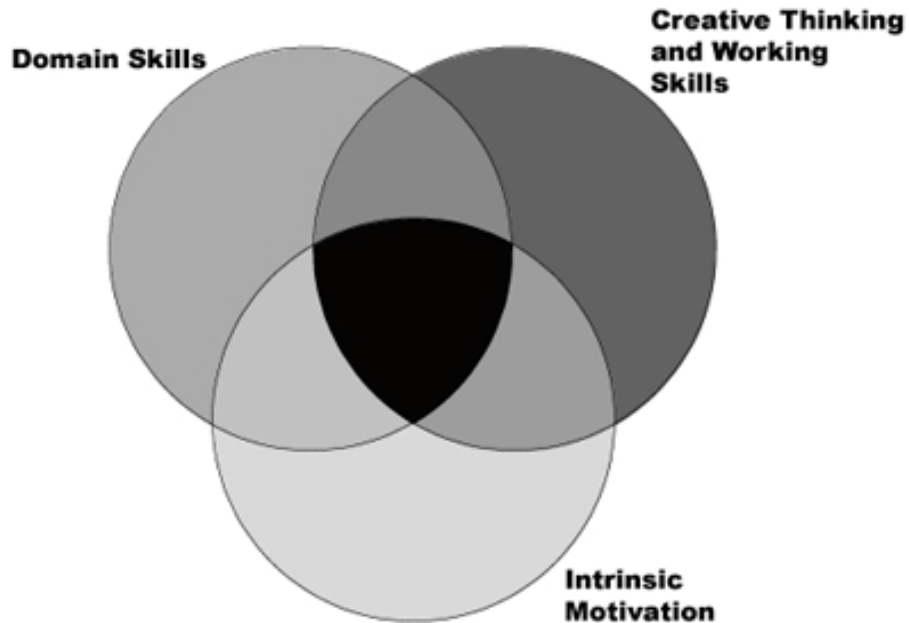
(Amabile T. M., 1989)

This is a Venn diagram that shows Amabile's model of creativity. She postulates

that where one's motivation, or passion, meets with one's domain skills, or training in the

genre, meets with one's creative thinking and working skills, or training in creativity

exists a sweet central spot of overlap. This is where all our knowledge, training, talent,

experiences, love, passion, and energy comes together, and this is where one should be

spending their time. At this point, all we know synergizes into our highest level of

creativity. It sounds rather like common sense, but it shocked me.

In that instant everything changed for me. I saw that there was something more out there for me, something that I could do that I would love, something that I could bring to the world, something that could combine all my unique experiences. Up until that point I felt that I was going through the motions, just doing what I was supposed to do, without having a direction or a passion for where I was going. This moment turned me on my head. Now I knew that I should try to do something different that would break me out from my weak previous plan. I continued substitute teaching, but had completely lost my drive for it, and now recognized the energy drain that it had been causing for me. I started this program with the idea that I would become a classroom teacher, but that was not the right solution or path for me. My passion was for humor and comedy. All I needed to do was gather the necessary the skill set, a refining of my talent to a marketable package. With that I would be able to enter the center of this Venn diagram. I had an affinity for humor, now I needed to study it, research why others would need to listen to me, and learn how to manifest it in others and myself. I also needed to find a way to turn this into a career, where I could earn enough to support myself.

I began a serious study of humor and put together a presentation called The HaHa Moment, which was accepted for MindCamp, a creativity conference held yearly in Canada (http://www.mindcamp.org). I also started a web site and a blog (The Haha Moment http://thehahamoment.weebly.com). I spoke at a couple of functions held at libraries and Girl Scout Training seminars, but I still had not found my direction; my inner bell had not yet rung. I was getting closer to my target, but I had yet to find what would be the bull's eye.

At MindCamp I took a workshop on improv. I loved it. It was amazing. At the end of the session, the woman leading the presentation held my face as she made me promise to go home and join an improv class. So I did. I have been taking classes and studying it ever since.

My next challenge was to figure out what to do with it. I wanted a career, one that would use my talents and my education. I came across an article that talked about using improv in the classroom and the light clicked on for me. Every time I had taken my children and their friends to a show, they would talk about wanting to do what they saw us do on stage. So I set out on a mental journey to figure out how to combine improv and creativity skills. If I could develop that into a well-rounded program, I would have a great niche, and hopefully a satisfying career. I had finally figured out what I wanted to be when I grew up.

Section Two: Pertinent Literature

Introduction

When preparing to do research for this project, I began my information gathering the way I always start my studies. I went on Amazon.com and searched for books on improv. I purchased a few by authors whose names I recognized as leaders in the field such as Del Close, Keith Johnstone, and Viola Spolin. I selected books that appeared to cover the topic thoroughly, as well as books that would contribute to my grasp of the subject. After reading those, I made a list of people or books that those authors had mentioned, and gathered those also. Then I looked at sources that had been referenced, and obtained those.

For articles, I employed a similar process, beginning at the school's database and looking to see what might be relevant. Then I made a list of people whom I knew and respected in the field, with the intention of interviewing them, and tapping into their experience.

My biggest influences have been the originators and innovators of the field, Charna Halpern, Jill Bernard, and Patti Stiles, in addition to the previously mentioned authors. Institutions that have had great influence included Second City, Improv Olympics, ComedySportz, and the television show "Whose Line is it Anyway?"

I wanted to combine these great minds and schools of thought, with those of the fields of creativity and education, to create a product that was valid and well rounded.

As a daughter of a librarian, I headed to the stacks to find everything that I could related to my topic. Piles formed on my desk, then on the floor next to me. I spent all

free moments with my nose in one book or another. These are the readings that I used for

research and inspiration:

<div align="center">Annotated Bibliography</div>

Bedore, B. (2004). *101 improv games for children and adults* (1st Edition ed.). (A.

      Mummery, Ed.) Alameda, CA, USA: Hunter House Inc.

This has been a hugely helpful resource for me. It listed games, divided into useful

categories such as "warm ups" or "singing games". The author also includes the

level that is best for play, i.e. beginner, intermediate, or advanced. Most of his games

are familiar to those in the improv field, but he has gathered them all together in a

useful single source.

Bernard, Jill. (2007). Small cute book of improv (3rd Edition). Rego Park, NY, USA:

      YESand.com Publishing

For such a small book (it is only ten pages long) the author has encompassed most

of the painful downfalls that improvers end up taking, and the solutions to rectify

them. I found her book helpful both for this project and for my personal

performances. Her vast experience is what makes this streamlined book still so

conclusive.

Halpern, C., & Del, C. (2001). *Truth in comedy* (1st Edition ed.). (K. ". Johnson, Ed.)

      Colorado Springs, CO, USA: Meriwether Publishing Ltd.

This book was an amazing all-encompassing source written by the developers of

The Harold, a specific type of improv show. Each chapter guides the reader through

a series of improv classes, as if they were sitting in a master session. Each chapter

ends with points of advice that are useful to both the beginner and the advanced

player.

Koppett, K. (2001). *Training to imagine.* Sterling, VA, USA: Stylus.

I added Kat's book to my reading list because she is both an influence in the improv

world (I personally was excited to discover that she and I were both members of a

Facebook improv support group) and a great trainer in the "outside" world. I felt

that her information helped me to bridge the gap between what I like to do and

what I want to help others learn how to do.

Madson, P. R. (2005). *Improv wisdom: don't prepare, just show up* (1st Edition ed.). New

       York City, NY, USA: Random House, Inc.

For the person who may just be starting out, or who wants to incorporate improv-

like living into a daily life, Madson's book is the answer. She discussed her personal

journey into the field, and her book gave me a great foundation and structure for the

path that I thought my project should take.

Salinsky, T., & Frances-White, D. (2008). *The improv handbook.* New York City, NY,

       USA: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Here is a great basic encyclopedia of all that is needed to know in improv. The

authors were students of Patti Stiles, a great in the world of improv, and this book is

almost a tribute to her. It is divided into basic sections that guide someone who is

interested in professional improv along the path to get there. I found it useful for my introduction to the students to the world of improv. It spells out many of the basic tenets of the style for a new participant, but is also useful for the intermediate or even advanced player.

     In addition to these readings, I also referenced other sources. These were used to inform my understanding on more specific questions, served as sources for my lesson plans, or have influenced my thoughts and understand on humor, teaching methods, and learning skills. These include:

Amabile, T. (1998). How to kill creativity. *Harvard Business Review* , *76* (5), 76-87.

Bergson, H. (2008). *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic.* (C. Brereton, & F. Rothwell, Trans.) Rockville, MD, USA: ARC Manor.

Critchley, S. (2002). *On humor.* (S. Critchley, & R. Kearney, Eds.) London, England: Routledge.

de Bono, E. (1973). *Lateral thinking: Creativity step by step.* New York City, NY, USA: Harper Colophon.

Duhigg, C. (2012). *The power of habit.* New York City, NY, USA: Random House Publishing Group.

Kanter, R. M. (2002). Strategy as improvisational theater: Companies that want to outpace the competition throw out the script and improvise their way to new strategies. *MIT Sloan Management Review* , *43* (2), 76-82.

Maples, J. (2007). English class at the improv: Using improvisation to teach middle

    school students confidence, community, and content. *The Clearing House , 80* (6),

    273-279.

Meier, D. (2000). *The accelerated learning handbook.* New York City, NY, USA:

    McGraw-Hill.

Metcalf, C., & Felible, R. (1992). *Lighten up: Survival skills for people under pressure.*

    Reading, MA, USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Pinker, S. (1999). *How the mind works.* New York City, NY, USA: Norton, W.W. & Co.

    Inc.

Prince, G. M. (1992). The operational mechanism of synectics. In S. J. Parnes, *Source*

    book for creative problem solving (pp. 168-177). Hadley, MA, USA: Creative

    Education Foundation Press.

Puccio, G. J., Mance, M., & Murdock, M. C. (2011). *Creative leadership:Skills that drive*

    change (2nd Edition ed.). Buffalo, NY, USA: SAGE.

Provine, R. R. (2000). *Laughter.* New York City, NY, USA: Penguin Group.

Salopek, J. J. (2004). Improvisation: Not just funny business. *T+D , 58* (5), 116-119.

Sheldon Huffaker, J., & West, E. (2005). Enhancing learning in the business classroom:

    An adventure with improv theater techniques. *Journal of Management Education,*

    29 (6), 852-869.

Weiner, D. J. (1999). Using theater improvisation to assess interpersonal functioning.

    International Journal of Action Meathods: Psychodrama, Skill Training, and Role

    Playing , 52 (2), 51-64.

Section Three: Process Plan

Goals and Outcomes

The plan for this project was to research and read as much as I could on the topic, so that I could develop the lessons in accordance with my training and experience as a teacher and with the information gleaned from my studies in creativity. Then I planned to use these lesson plans to gain approval from school administration, so that I could begin recruiting students as participants. With the students and administration organized, I would implement my plans and share my learnings.

When I began this project, it was still nebulous in nature. I only had a rough idea of what I wanted to do, which was something around the practice of improvisation. I understood, more in theory than in any concrete fashion, that there was a strong tie between creativity and improv, so I set about connecting the dots for myself.

As I delved into the literature, and studied how improv practitioners and creative practitioners worked, I began to see what I might add to this combined field. As a certified teacher, I knew there was much that remained to be done in the field of education, and so much more that we could do to develop young minds. I decided to focus the project on young adults. I decided to teach improv techniques and creativity skills to High School students.

I began to interview students to discover if this was something that I could get them to buy into. If students understood the desired outcome, would they still be willing to volunteer and to participate fully? The response was overwhelmingly positive. This was a project that would be accepted by the core focused age group.

My next step was to gain official "buy-in" by the targeted school administration. I wrote up a proposal and some sample lesson plans and met with the principal of the school where I substitute teach. I assumed that this would be my easiest method, as they knew me well, and I had been cleared through their background check and fingerprinting source to work in the building.

After I received the administrative okay, I created the eight lesson plans using my knowledge of successful teaching methods, creativity skills and improvisational guidelines. I combed through countless activities derived from books and from personal experience to select activities that met the criteria for both fields. I developed a lesson plan template, that included skills and learning objectives to be met, content discussion, warm ups, two games, with a debrief after each one, and a written activity. I felt that each type of learner must be addressed, so activities aimed at each were included.

As I was working on these lessons, it became apparent to me that a companion workbook would be advantageous. With the written work that was being expected of the students, I wanted both a fun and guided place for the students to add their thoughts or participate in an exercise more fully. I also wanted them to have something tangible afterwards that would allow them to remember the work that they completed.

Once permission had been granted, an appropriate space was found, students were signed up, and the preparation work completed, the actual classes were ready to begin. I had hoped for eight to twelve students and I had ten show up the first day, which was perfect.

Classes began very well, as the students knew each other and were very open to trying new things. We ran classes every Monday afterschool in an empty classroom.

The students enjoyed themselves, and asked for a few weeks to be postponed so that they would not have to miss class due to track meets. We would begin with a snack and chat before we got down to work, to create a separation from the regular school day. We would then gather in a circle to look at the workbook pages for the day, discuss what was going to happen, the affective skills, and the activities, and how they related to creativity. This was also a time that I used to answer questions, explain terminology, and encourage feedback. (Students needed to be reminded that I was looking for their opinions, something that was foreign to their usual classroom protocol.) After discussion, we would do warm-ups together as a group, and then begin our games. After a short explanation of the rules, the students were very good about diving in and discovering as they went along. At various points during the class, the videographer would pull a student or two out for an interview in the hall. After we completed all the activities, I would ask what they liked, did not like, and wanted to do again. Then I would close with a preview of what we were going to work on next week, and I made sure that everyone had a ride home.

Timeline

To make sure that I met all my requirements, and stayed on track, I set this timeline for myself. Having seen friends in other programs delay graduation due to work stretching beyond expectations, I was determined to stick to it.

Timeline Graph

As soon as possible:	Meet with school officials to obtain permission and permits needed to hold classes	2 H
	Gather data, read, research	40 H
February	Compile appropriate games related to CPS strategies	15 H
	Write 8 lesson plans	30 H
	Write accompanying workbook/journal	45 H
	Find publisher/printer	2 H
	Sketch out ideas for video shots	2 H
	Invite 360° evaluators (members of the department)	2 H
	Write submission for MindCamp	2 H
	Obtain a group of 8-12 students who are able to participate for eight weeks, and gain their parents permission	2 H
March:	Hold classes, Mondays from 3:20 – 4:50 , 4 out of the 8 lessons	6 H in class, plus 6 H prep
	Compile evaluations and observations	5 H
	Make lesson adjustments	5 H
	Make lesson adjustments	5 H
	Hold performance for parents and supporters	2 H

April:	Write up key learnings and evaluations	20 H
	Adjust lesson plans for next sessions	*Future action 5 H
	Review footage, begin editing	*Future action 50 H
August:	Present shortened seminar to Youth program at MindCamp	*Future action 10 H prep, 1.5 H session
Total hours:		200 H
		66.5 H future action

Section Four: Outcomes

Introduction

The most important outcome of *Improv(ing) Students* is the future work it has created for me. This is the first step into the appropriate career path for me, and one that took a whole educational journey to find. After countless CPS sessions, interviews, and alternative paths, I have finally found the middle of that Venn diagram (see Figure 1) for myself, the sweet spot where I was able to use my talent in humor, my experience as an educator, and my belief in creativity. This is the place where my talent, knowledge and motivation came together. For me this means my talent in performance and comedy, my knowledge and experience in teaching plus my knowledge of creativity tools, together with my motivation to share these loves in a professional arena. This looks like improv to me. When I reflect back to the ah-ha moment that I had at the Expert-to-Expert conference two years ago, I now see the spot where I am most creative, come to fruition.

In addition to the fantastic experience that this has created for me, there are tangible outcomes to this project. I have finished this mission with eight lesson plans, that have been student tested and can be used in future training sessions, a comprehensive workbook that acts as a partner to these lessons, and hours of footage that will be edited into a useful movie clip. These are the products for my future.

The Lesson Plans

The eight lesson plans that I have written follow templates that I used as a classroom teacher. I have modified almost every one while in the field to reflect the needs or moods of the students. It is important to me that these reflect what is truly

useful and workable, rather than what I felt should happen. Working with teenagers requires quite a bit of flexibility, and so I modified the plans as needed.

Each lesson plan included a list of potential warm ups, a mini lecture that related to later activities and to the week's learning objective, two games, and debrief questions related to those games to spark conversation afterwards. These lessons reflected affective skills of creativity and were focused on the content incorporated in basic improvisation. The template allows for additional lessons to be written, for further expansion of seminar.

Games were chosen by their connection to the week's topic, the skill level assumed for the class (basic), and the "playability" of the game, or its action and likelihood of being accepted by eighteen-year-old students. Debrief questions were written to start conversations, and allowed for teachable tangents.

This is an example of a lesson that was designed for this program:

Improv Lesson Plans: *Improv(ing) Students*

Lesson 1: Who are you?

Critical Thinking/ Affective Skills:
- Dreaming
- Playfulness
- Tolerance for risk
- Tolerance for complexity

Improv skills:
- Yes, and…
- Let go and play

Mini lecture:

Intro creativity…definition, history, uses
  - Your definition? Other definitions.
  - Brief history 1950's question it, studied now as Masters', conferences, interested groups
  - Uses of…business, research, coaching, critical thinking, innovation, etc.
Intro improv…relation to creativity
  - Medial prefrontal cortex: inner narrator
  - Dorsolateral prefrontal cortex: impulse control/ conscious brain
  - Important part of creativity is to relax your neurons (inhibit DLPFC) to allow new connections to form

Warm up:
Eights (shake r arm for 8, l arm for 8, r leg for 8, l leg for 8, r arm for 7, l arm for 7, etc.)
Horse lips (pbbbbttthhh)
Unique New York
Red Leather, Yellow Leather

Game 1:
Pointing at Things and Saying What They Are…
- 60 seconds walking around room naming items
- Debrief: how did that feel? Was it hard?
- 60 seconds walking around the room saying what the last thing you pointed at was. i.e., point to floor, then door and say "floor"
- Debrief: harder, easier?

- 60 seconds pointing at things and saying what they are not
- Debrief:
    i) What do you think about these 3 games?
    ii) Which was hardest?
    iii) (Many feel this is harder, some people slow down, get quieter, and seem to run out of words
    iv) Weird-since it IS possible to be wrong the second time around, but not the third time, where it is impossible to be wrong. WHY?!?!
    v) Option paralysis? Trying too hard to be…fun, funny, inventive, creative? This is deferring judgment.
    vi) Stop trying so hard…just enjoy, be playful, and risky
- 60 seconds pointing at things saying what they are not…LOUDLY and QUICKLY
- Debrief: any better? (Usually sounds better) take away: energy, focus, and enthusiasm gets a much more successful outcome

Yes, and…
   ❖ Building on others ideas
   ❖ It is an act of courage and optimism, allows for you to share control
   ❖ Blocking is controlling, accepting is sharing

Game 2: Simon Says
   o On pieces of paper have students list activities
   o Have students form two lines
   o An activity is chosen (skiing, bowling, going to school)
   o Students do first step (I'm putting on my boots)
   o Next student does first step then adds next step (I'm putting on my boots, and grabbing my skis)
   o 1st student does first step, second step, then adds a third step
   o Continue until someone goofs

Debrief:
What did you see happen? How did it feel to build on someone else's idea?

Written Activity:
Review skill: brainstorming

Imagine one experience that you've had recently where you have said "no" to someone. Brainstorm a list of what could have happened if you'd said "yes". How do you think your life would change if you said yes to more things?

The Workbook

This workbook is a labor of love. As it became obvious that one would be necessary, I began making notes on what I thought it would look like. These pages morphed many times. They were adjusted for content, and amended to include more of the process, until the present form emerged. Color choices were agonized over, activities were reviewed, wording was checked and finally a product began to emerge. Each section includes the week's learning objectives, the related affective skills with their definitions, and activities connecting to these skills. There are also Creative Problem Solving tools that were added to extend the learning to include creative thinking. I see myself refining this even more, and then publishing it to use in future training sessions with students.

The choice to include a workbook stemmed out of my experience as a teacher of students with multiple intelligences, because participating in the activities alone is not necessarily enough for comprehension and retention by every student. I also wanted to provide a place for reflection for students who were not as vocal, or needed a longer reflection period than other, more extroverted students. See Appendix A for an excerpt.

The Footage

One of the best aspects of this project was being able to team up with my son for his videography and film class. He was present at every session, scurrying around behind us trying to get the best angle for his camera. He shot every warm up, game, and discussion. He pulled students out individually over the eight weeks to film an interview with them. This was done outside of the main room, to allow for unhindered dialog. The editing of these hours of footage has not yet been accomplished, as there are so many to

run through, and we have not yet finished all the sessions, but the culminating work will

be fascinating to watch.

      These hours will be edited down to a clip that I will post onto YouTube, Applied

Improvisers Network, and other venues, and will use it to advertise what the program

does for students. It is expected to run under three minutes, to maximize viewers. See

Appendix B for a link to a clip.

Section Five: Key Learnings

Introduction

 Improv(ing) Students has become the most rewarding and intimidating project that I have ever worked on. As a life changing event, it has taught me much, and of course the biggest take-away has been the impetus for personal growth. Ultimately, I have learned how I work and what I want to focus my energy on. The following are my process and content learnings, the take aways that have been the indicators of my personal growth.

1) I am a people person.

 I need to work with people. I enjoy being part of a group that is working productively. I like to feed off of the energy generated when I am part of a crowd. I enjoy the learning experiences that I have when I am part of someone else's learning experience. I realized this when I would walk into class feeling slightly tired or drained (because afterschool is after a long day for me) and I would walk out feeling energized and ready to tackle anything. In every session the students would make me laugh and that made me feel successful. I believe playfulness is stimulating, both to my mind and my body.

 I also like to work one-on-one with people. I realized, since that was true, I needed a sounding board partner. This is an individual who can help me organize my thoughts, and is able to see the patterns when I am too close to the work to pick up on them. I work best when there is discussion around the work, and I can vocalize my vision. This relationship I found particularly helpful when I was starting. I began with a nebulous idea, and a general sense of what would happen, but I needed someone to rein

in my ideas and help me focus them, so that I would end up with my desired results. My

sounding board partner was able to listen to my ramblings, ask pertinent questions, and

then peg me down to specific action steps. We looked at all the ideas and actions that I

wanted to pursue, identified what was relevant, and organized them with post-its.

2) I like using office supplies.

I love post-its. They help me map out a flexible course of action. I like to be able

to generate information or ideas, and move the steps around until they flowed. With

post-its, I can add thoughts that come later, and the work still remains tidy. This becomes

handy, as I do not think linearly. I have used post-its to organize my process plan, to

keep track of key learnings, to facilitate my choice of games, to remind me what I wanted

to do next, and to mark passages that I refer to frequently.

In addition to post-its, I use fun notebooks when I work on projects. I need to

write a final plan out in long hand to fully grasp the depth and width of it. I need to

experience the thought process created with a pen in hand to capture any nuances or

details that need to be added to my basic outline. I believe that long-term change occurs

when learning is spelled out, literally.   As I have written and rewritten notes for this

project, my understanding of it has increased. As I drew out each page for the workbook,

my comprehension of the skill on which it was focused grew stronger. I believe there is

kinesthetic learning involved when we write. When I realized that this was necessary for

me, I added the written sections to my workbook, assuming that there might be others

who need that final act to transform cloudy thoughts into clear thoughts. There were also

times when the physical act of writing long hand became a cathartic ideation experience.

Thinking happens during the action.

3) Straight lines do not exist in my nature.

Thinking does happen during the action. I tend to begin in the middle and work out towards the edges. I see myself like the sculptors who would chip at a block of marble until they found the beauty inside. This, I imagine, is reinforced by my implementer nature, and adds to why a sounding board partner is useful to me.

Beginning this project seemed daunting at first, so rather than look at it as a huge elephant, I picked parts to start on. Some aspects I liked better, so I started there, then worked until I reached a point where they met up with the other steps. Then I began work somewhere else, hopping along until I caught a rhythm and had encircled the whole endeavor.

4) I need to see to understand.

I consider myself to be a partial clarifier. My experience as a teacher has taught me that what I see in my mind is not always what others see, so if I am looking for a particular outcome I need to be very clear about my expectations. When I am the student, this means seeing examples. For this project I found it extremely helpful to be able to go to the digital commons to see how others handled the issues and challenges that I was facing.

5) I am still a teacher.

Since I was in the fourth grade, I have envisioned myself as a teacher. When faced with life changing events, it was the first activity that I relied on for a salary. After a number of disheartening situations, and a small amount of professional burnout, I believed that I would no longer have a need for my teacher training. Working like this, with students again, I have recaptured my love of teaching. I had always maintained that

a teacher was a teacher, regardless of content. Educating was a calling, and the subject was just personal preference. While that may still be true to some point, I have realized that I prefer to be outside core content. The skills and values that I teach are cross content and are free from academic review or assessment. Real ability is tested in the student's success that they perceive, and their desire to learn beyond the classroom. In this content I get to be the adult who says "try this, it's new" rather than being the adult who says "stop doing that, we don't do it that way and we don't have time for your idea."

I still want to teach, now more than ever, but I want to teach on the fringe, where interim reports and multiple-choice assessment do not visit. I want to teach where the students feel free to learn and experiment and come to know themselves.

6) Working with teenagers exhilarates me.

I have been working with teenagers from the moment I stopped being one. Through scouting, church groups, and camp staff, I have worked to be a mentor and a confidant to this group of in-between childhood and adulthood people. I love it. I love the energy that they bring to activities, I love their sense of humor, and I love the future opportunities that they embody.

One of the students who attended my sessions was less of an extrovert than others in the class. For some of the activities he really worked outside of his comfort zone. He always participated, but it was often more of a challenge for him. Then one day we played a pun-based game. Many students considered this hard, because it is not a team-based game. The player steps forward, by him or herself, and delivers the pun grounded joke. This activity coincided with our study of tolerance to risk. This more introverted student was rapid firing these puns once he got started and all but closed out the other

students. They were nearly drop-jawed watching him, as during the rest of the school

day he is not very talkative. I got to see this student conquer a public speaking mountain,

and impress his peer group. He demonstrated skill mastery, and I was able to witness

this.

7) Learners need to be fed.

At the first class my daughter asked if I brought food. I had not. She growled. The next

week I stopped at a store and picked up a package of cookies. When the class walked in

and saw there was something to eat, they worked quickly. After a long day of classes,

teenagers, who walk around in a state of semi-starvation most of the time anyway, are

famished. A small snack helps to keep them happy and focused. Also, food is very

unifying. Traditionally we have broken bread with those in our families or tribes, so the

act of sharing food with someone invites them to be part of our tribe.

Wrap Up

 Creativity has an elastic waistband, and it stretches to include very different

aspects. I am constantly bombarded with the statement "Oh, but I'm not creative like

you." I have spent years in "creative" fields, first as a dancer, and then as a perpetual

crafter. While these are creative activities, restraining the definition to just these genres

is very limiting. When I joined the Master's program in Creative Studies and I began to

learn about Creative Problem Solving and the Torrance Incubation Model, and the

practice of creativity, I began to see how so many different qualities and actions could be

labeled "creative". This project does not reflect all the lofty academic topics that I have

read and written about over the years, but it does reflect my personal view on creativity.

Creativity boils down to making the best choice. Every day we make thousands of

choices. Creativity to me could be defined as finding and making the best decision, not the easiest, not the first, not the typical or traditional, but the best. The solution that rings is the creative solution. If I can teach how to do this to another generation, and teach it in a humorous, engaging way, then I will have fully satisfied my mission here, and done it in a creative manner.

Section Six: Conclusion

Conclusion

When I began this journey with the International Center for Studies in Creativity, I was on a different path. I had just completed my teacher's certification program and was teaching at an inner city school. I hated my job and was miserable. One of my first actions after taking CRS 559 was to quit my job, an action that came directly from a Creative Problem Solving facilitation. Over the years that I have spent in the department, what I have learned here has guided me along the path to what I really need to do with my life. If you were to witness my various ah-ha moments as they occurred, you would see a mass of 'hit' post-its in each frame, and there were many to witness. My journey has not been abrupt, or direct. Rather, it resembles the path a rock climber takes, indirect, with pauses for breathing as a precipice is mounted, with the summit barely visible for most of the trip. However, I can assure you that the view, once finally reached, is amazing. And intimidating.

What I have learned about creativity and leadership can be summed up in one word: preparation. To be fully creative for myself I need to have set the stage. I need to know what my outcomes could be, how I want to achieve them, and what I will need to accomplish them. I need to gain focus, and now I know the steps I have to take and the people that have to be involved in that process to attain that. To inspire creativity in others requires even more planning. When leading others, especially children through this process, there is no chance of over preparation. Activities, back up activities, discussion points, alternative discussion points, supplies, snacks, all need to be arranged so that these students could be set up for success.

As this seminar for students grew, I saw the potential that this work has. What I see myself doing in the future is contacting school districts to have this added onto their continuing education program. I hope to use that chance to further refine it while I work out a business plan. My next precipice appears to be getting this ready for a Kickstarter, so that I can bring this program into schools as part of their student leadership training, maybe becoming as common as DARE programs are now.

Out of all of this I have learned how necessary this opportunity is for children. I see the look on their faces when they realize that what we do really has no limits, what is expected of them may be hard because it is a stretch and it is personal (there is no acceptable pat answer) but worth it, and that there is a place where they can find out who they are, who they want to be, and what they need to start doing to bridge that gap.

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Appendix A: WORKBOOK

CREATIVITY

WHAT IS IT?

WHERE IS IT?

WHO HAS IT?

WHAT BRINGS IT ON?

How else might we put it?

~generation of novel and useful ideas

(Gryskiewicz, 1995)

~modify self-imposed constraints
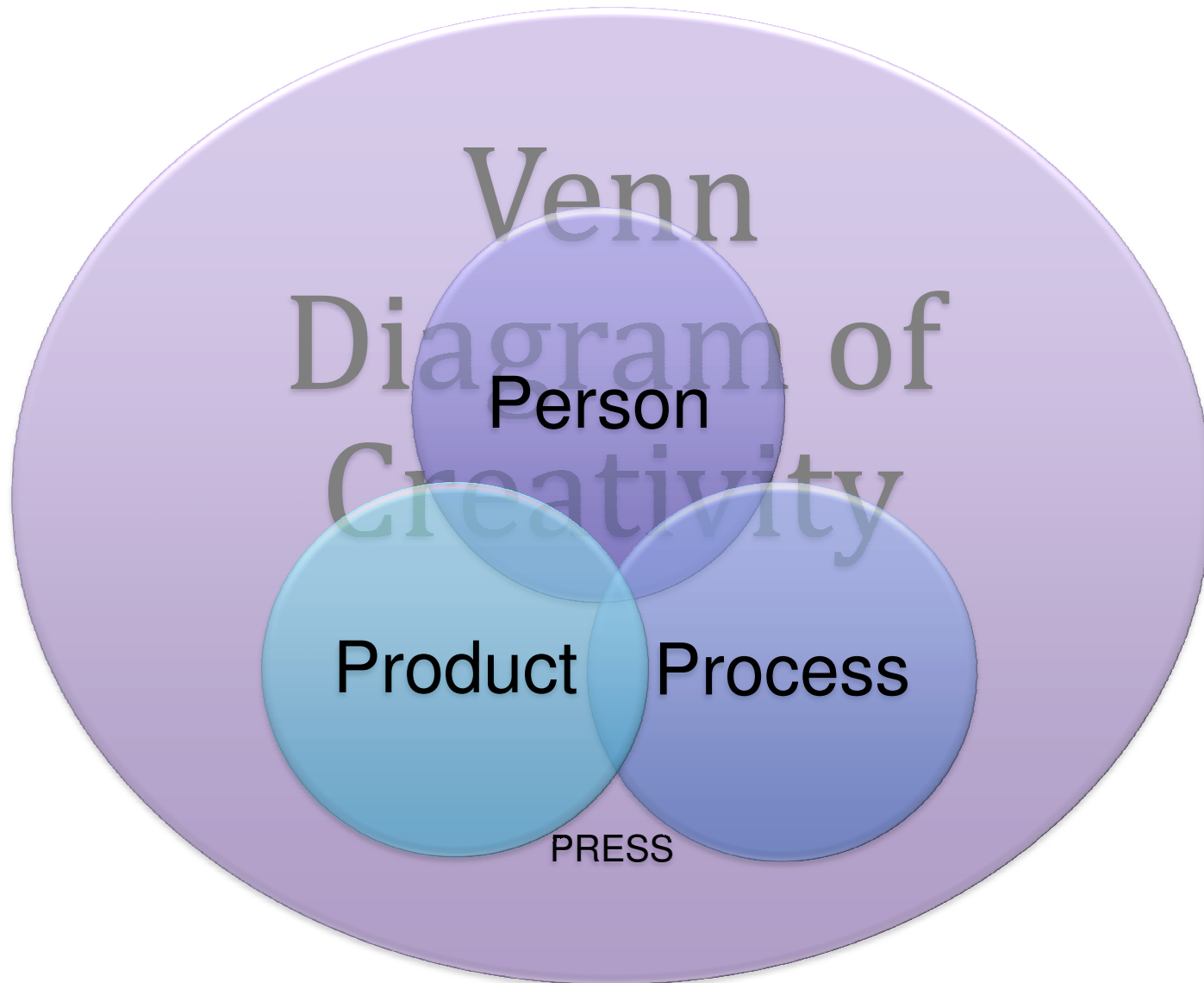
(Ackoff&Vergara 1988)

...and in Math, it would be:

~C=fA(K,I,E) or
Creativity is the function of attitude times knowledge, imagination, and evaluation skills

(Noller &Parnes)

Venn Diagramon next page (Rhodes,1961)

The Four P's

- Person: how people are creative

- Product: the artifacts of creativity

- Process: how people create or can use and apply their creativity

- Press: the climate or culture that improves or crushes creativity

(Mel Rhodes 1961, Miller, Vehar & Firestien 2001)

Yes, and…

Let go and PLAY

Dreaming: imagining as possible your desires and hopes

Playfulness: freely toying with ideas

Tolerance for risk: not allowing yourself to be shaken or unnerved by the possibility of failure

Tolerance for ambiguity: being able to deal with uncertainty AND to avoid leaping to conclusions

RULES FOR DIVERGING:

1. Defer Judgment

2. Strive for quantity

3. Seek wild and unusual ideas

4. Build on other ideas.

Improv is a diverging tool. These are the same rules for Brainstorming, so mark this page –

you'll use it again.

(Osborn, Applied Imagination 1953)

Warm ups

What ever you do, what ever you work on, always start with a warm up.

Warm up your voice, your body, your mind, your skill set.

List warm ups that you like:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Examples of warm ups that we do:

Voice:
Horse lips
Unique New York
Red Leather, Yellow Leather
Mama la Papa la
Gutta butta gutta butta gutta butta gut, butta gutta butta gutta butta gutta butt

Body:
Eights
Zombie tag
Mirrors
Zoom, Schwartz, Perfigliano

<u>Mind:</u>
Elephant in the bathtub
New Ice cream flavors
Uses of Ping-Pong balls
Stop means jump

Pointing at Things

Number of Players: Whole group

Directions: The rules for this game are simple. For the first round, everyone simply walks around the space pointing at objects and naming what they are, for example if you were to point to the floor, you would say "floor." Break for questions included on the next page. Next round, walk around and say the last thing that you pointed to, for example if you pointed to the floor, then to the door, you would say "floor", then when you pointed to the window, you would say "door", and so on. Break again for questions. For the last session walk around and point at things and say what they are not, for example, if you were to continue pointing to

the floor (you really need to look around more in this room, the poor floor is so boring) while pointing to the floor you could say "cat" or "window" or "Wisconsin", it doesn't matter, as long as you DON'T say "floor."

(Truth in Comedy, Halpern, Close,& Johnson 1994)

GAME ONE

What are you initial feelings and reactions?

What was the difference for you at the beginning and at the end? What changes did you experience?

How will you use what you did in another part of your life?

Simon Says...

Number of Players: Whole group, in two lines

Directions: Working from a random list of active activities (skiing, pole vaulting, making a cake, etc.), the first two players in line come forward. One starts with the first step in the action, for example, "I'm putting on my boots!" The player is miming this action at the same time. The next player takes the first players step "I'm putting on my boots! (Using the same actions in a mimicking fashion) Adds an "and" and then adds the next step, "And tying the laces REALLY tight!" The first player begins again with their first action, adds the second players actions, adds an "and" and then adds the next step, so that it would look like this, I'm putting on my boots, tying the laces REALLY tight, AND grabbing my coat!" Each back and forth adds a step, while keeping the actions true to the original version. The "and" is the cue to add your own step, as it is only said for the last step. Continue until someone misses an action or forgets what they are doing.

GAME TWO

What was the hardest part of this game?

How did you *feel* when you were doing it?

What did you *see* happen?

How did it feel to build on someone else's ideas?

Brainstorming Activity

Imagine one experience that you've had recently where you have said "no" to someone. Brainstorm a list of what could have happened if you'd said "yes". How do you think your life would change if you said yes to more things?

APPENDIX B

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpx2-BTyqG4