

Collaborative Games from Improvised Comedy

I recently enjoyed a weekend course in comedy improvisation, run by the Brighton-based Maydays (www.themaydays.co.uk) For those who haven't seen improv, performers take suggestions from the audience as the starting points for improvised scenes which can be tremendously funny. "Whose Line Is it Anyway?" is the most well-known TV example.

One could make the analogy that "improv is to stand-up comedy as enquiry is to debate". Debate and stand-up comedy are competitive, display activities, designed to show off the cleverness of the individual performer to a passive audience.

Enquiry and improv, by contrast, are fundamentally collaborative. Participants must put their own ideas on hold and respond to what other participants say and do. They create something live in the moment which would not have resulted from any one person's thoughts. Here are three aspects of collaboration that are needed for both, together with skill-building games used in the improv tradition that transfer well to P4C.

Awareness

Improv performers need to be very aware of what other performers are doing, so that they can respond and make their actions part of the same imagined scene; enquirers need to be aware of who wants to speak.

Pass it On

In a circle, start by clapping towards the person on your left. They clap towards the person on their left, and so on round the circle. Second time, go faster. Third time, you can clap across the circle, making eye contact with someone and saying their name to make sure the clap is picked up by the right person. Lastly, if you are going to use a thumbs-up as a signal for your enquiry, switch to using that. It may help to embed the idea that you shouldn't take for ever to decide who to pass it to.

Start, Stop, Jump

You need a big enough space for everyone to walk randomly around, at a relaxed pace, stepping into the spaces left by others. Explain that when you stop, the aim is for everyone else to stop at the same time, so all be aware of people on the edge of your vision. Again, when you start, everyone should start at the same time.

After a few rounds, anyone in the group can stop or start. The group should begin to mesh together, so that it becomes difficult to tell who was first to stop. You can add an extra element, that while stopped, someone can initiate a jump (or you can just start again). When it works well, it's a good bonding experience. And if it doesn't, it's quite funny, which is a bonding experience of its own.

Responsiveness

A combination of listening and building on the ideas of others is crucial for both improv and enquiry. Younger children in particular often tend at first to make points that don't connect to each other.

Yes And...

All stand in a circle. In pairs, one partner says, "Let's..." and makes a suggestion about something to do e.g. "bake a cake".

The other partner responds, "Yes and..." and adds a detail or extends the scenario "e.g. Yes, and let's make it really big". And so on back and forth, probably building into an extravagant scenario.

Yes But...

All sit in a circle. As before, but this time, respond to each suggestion with "Yes but..." which begins to get an argument going, but feels rather negative.

Yes And Yes But...

Switch between the two during the same scenario – start with all standing, going "Yes and...", then sit and switch to "Yes but..." This time you'll get a rhythm going where there are periods of creative thinking followed by periods of critical thinking, which is reminiscent of the two "pistons" that power enquiry... "What if?", "Hang on a minute."

Freedom

The fear of "not getting it right" which can stifle creativity and participation. One way to do this is to use games where you can say more or less anything.

One Word Story

In pairs, tell a story one word at a time, ping-ponging backwards and forwards. Can help to start "once upon a time..."

Barney

I won't describe this one here, because I think everyone should visit the must-click website where I just found it, www.improvcyclopedia.org which has over 500 games, indexed by category. I found this one under "spontaneity". Remarkably, you can actually download the entire encyclopaedia as a pdf. Only some of the games will be relevant to P4C, but it's a very generous, free service and a boon for drama lessons.