

CRITICAL THINKING AND IMPROVISATION

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Twenty graduate students entered the college classroom and sat facing the front of the room. At once they were asked to rearrange the chairs to sit in a circle, so that each person could see every other person. They were asked to say their names in a variety of ways, changing the pitch, volume, duration. They stood in a circle and created shapes or images with their bodies that illustrated their names, and attempted to perform each individual's shape while repeating the name. Activities using imagination, sense memory, and pantomime followed the warm-up games. At the end of the class all the students knew everyone's name, and were eager to return to the next class to explore further as improvisational players. The students became an ensemble, a "community" of players.

To improvise is to "make, invent, arrange or compose offhand, or on the spur of the moment."¹ Dramatic improvisation encompasses these activities using the development of characters, situations, conflicts and resolutions. An environment conducive to improvisation is one in which a person feels free to take risks and which facilitates a variety of experiences. "Experiencing is penetrating into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, intuitive."² The interplay between these modes contributes to a depth of understanding and a richer, more complex framework to build upon. The students, referred to now as "players," bring their experiences to the improvisations, and also experience new phenomena during the process. They are required to think and make choices based on continuous input.

Critical thinking is the reasonable and reflective use of the rational mind which relies on judgment, is sensitive to context, and responsible to community. It involves the internalization of a set of criteria so that moment to moment original responses to each given mental stimuli can occur. Critical thinking is a creative activity that "involves the continuous interplay among the generation, assessment, selection, and assembly of ideas."³ The pathway of thought is multidirectional whereby each idea or activity affects each subsequent and each preceding one, necessitating continuous selection and decision. Dramatic improvisation is an exercise in critical thinking, and can only be accomplished through the use of critical thinking.

The player in the improvisation workshop is asked to begin by pantomiming a chore or activity such as one that she does in the morning. The player thinks about the variety of activities which she has done in the past, then thinks about which would be appropriate to perform in class. She then decides how to attempt the pantomime, at which point she should begin and where she should end. She must be sensitive to context and must relate to her own criteria. All of these decisions involve choices which are made "on the spur of the moment," and each choice reflects critical thinking. The choices are individual and idiosyncratic, and are determined

by so many factors that it would be impossible not to use critical thinking.

In another exercise, several players are asked to participate in a group improvisation based on entering and exiting a vehicle, such as a train, a boat, or a plane. Each player must recall the sensation of the movement associated with the particular vehicle, and work together to keep the illusion alive for the whole group. The players build upon their previous experiences, in this case train or boat rides, and develop a new mental construction which enables them to portray this experience out of context. Critical thinking makes it possible to recall information and experiences, and develop with others a new way to present it.

The players plan together and respond spontaneously to each other, using critical thinking to create a plan and again to choose appropriate responses with each new stimuli. When the players are given an assignment to create a scene at the bus stop, they plan ahead and choose which character they would like to be. As the scene begins they know who their characters are, and perhaps the direction or development of the scene, but they do not know what the other character is going to say next. Therefore each response is a spontaneous reaction based upon the information just received; if the player does not think quickly or thoroughly, the response will not be appropriate.

Developing the scene — constructing a beginning, middle, and end — requires critical thinking. The players must build a framework for the composition, developing ideas prior to performance and also while performing. Practice and experience in improvisation will develop skills which facilitate the process, but the process itself requires thinking "on your feet" every time. Each improvisation is a new experience, and you never know what will happen or how it will turn out.

Creative and critical thinking involves the discovery of new ideas and new associations. In improvisation this occurs in a variety of ways. The players create new characters and discover new feelings and thoughts through identification with the character. This can take place immediately or can be a process which evolves for several years. The involvement in a simulated situation is equivalent to having a real-life experience, and the insights gained can profoundly affect the player. The players took part in an improvised town meeting to discuss the problems affecting their community. They argued and discussed many problems and came up with many solutions, while maintaining their characters. They became deeply engrossed in the feelings and problems of the people they were portraying, and gained insight while making several discoveries.

While the players were involved with the problems of this community, they were able to expose their emotions while in character. The courage to play a role, and to express yourself openly as another person, with other people, allows

new ideas to proliferate. On the one hand, it offers the opportunity to explore deeper feelings than one would normally show in the presence of others. And on the other hand, it makes it possible to use this sense of freedom to explore other situations and problems outside of the realm of dramatic improvisation.

Critical thinking also involves problem solving, and in improvisation this is accomplished through exercises which incorporate conflict and resolution. The players are either given a conflict to explore, or come up with one on their own, and then argue ways to resolve it. This often occurs while on their feet in the process of improvisation. At each step the players encounter a new problem, and they work together to choose appropriate solutions. Reasoning through each response in rational improvised dialogue allows the player to solve the immediate problems. However, the player is usually involved in so many processes — constructing the character and situation — that the critical thinking is virtually unnoticed. It becomes a natural process, and is developed for future use in other activities and situations in addition to improvisation.

After the improvisation the players discuss and analyse their experience. They examine the relationships between characters, and the various solutions encountered for each problem. They acknowledge the metaphors in the sensual aspects of the drama, and think about the meaning in the descriptive language. The wife of the deceased cried incessantly during an improvisation of a funeral, and several players wrapped their arms around her and tried to console her. The players did not know each other very well, and would not have embraced under ordinary circumstances, but the characters had a different relationship and responded accordingly. They never spoke of love and caring, but it was manifested in their physical actions. The players are able to argue, love, hate, and reconcile. They become an ensemble, a family, a community.

Improvisation for the Classroom

Improvisation as an important activity which should be included in the school curriculum for several reasons. It *PROMOTES CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING*, providing an avenue for this type of thinking which is often disregarded or neglected in many classrooms. Many teachers stress the acquisition of information as a basis for knowledge, accepting only one right answer. It is passive learning in which the student has no significant input. "Knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no risks, and makes no demands. It is automatic. It is thoughtless."⁴

Improvisation gives the student the opportunity to explore a situation in a variety of ways, in an environment which allows for risk taking, where the "right answer" is not applicable nor appropriate.

Improvisation is *INTERACTIVE AND SUPPORTS COOPERATIVE LEARNING*. Although a few of the exercises are performed by a solo player, most improvisation occurs between two or more players. They must build together,

cooperatively, in order to encounter solutions to a given problem. Students learn to work together actively to find answers and produce results. There are far too many daily school activities which include testing for the right answer and grading competitively, ranking the students from best to worst. In improvisation students work in pairs and groups, often at the same time, so that external evaluation is not appropriate and very often not possible. The players depend upon each other and become committed to the activities together.

Improvisation is *PHYSICAL AND OFFERS A DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLE* which actively involves the players. Most students enjoy getting out of their seats and moving around in the classroom.

It is not only refreshing to change body positions but also healthy to encourage physical fitness. For some students it is a challenge to sit still and learn in the tradition manner. Improvisation allows the students to explore ideas on their feet, moving through space, communicating with body and voice.

Improvisation *DEVELOPS EMOTIONAL AND AFFECTIVE AWARENESS* through empathy with characters and situations. A student is able to express emotions through a character that would be difficult to show as himself or herself. The player gets in touch with these feelings by way of the "safe" character portrayal. The students learn to accept these feelings and become familiar with them. This helps them understand their world better, and can even be therapeutic. One student remarked that she was extremely angry in one scene. She said she really felt anger, and it was the first time since she was robbed (in real life) that she was able to express anger. She said she felt relief after the scene: a catharsis. School children have their own difficulties which can be expressed in their improvisations. They also find ways to deal with these problems metaphorically. They also develop sensitivity towards each other.

Improvisation *FOSTERS PROBLEM SOLVING*, both theoretically and for practical application. The students develop methods to create their improvisations, using prior knowledge and building new experiences together. They find solutions to problems which they encounter along the way, create scenes with a beginning and an end, and resolve a given conflict. The skills acquired from this experience are also useful for solving problems found in mathematics, science, and history.

Last, but certainly not least, these exercises should be included in the classroom because *IMPROVISATION IS FUN!*

Improvisation and the Role of the Teacher

The environment conducive to improvisation is set up by the teacher-facilitator. The attitude of the teacher can create a positive, productive environment, but can also inhibit growth and spontaneity. Therefore the teacher has the re-

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