



THEATRICALS CANADA

Teaching As Improvisation

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Improvisation is the foundation for all performance training. But improvisation means something different to different practitioners and for different practices – from TheatreSports to nuanced devising methodologies. The ability to improvise with objects, ideas, people, the environment, digital media and communities underpins all that I do. I will share my thoughts about improvisation and some of my favorite improvisation training strategies, but first I want to talk about what improvisation has taught me about teaching; because I believe good teaching is essentially good improvisation.

Most people are familiar with the “Yes, And...” drama game. It can be played in pairs or in a group. The game begins with one person making a simple statement. All subsequent statements made by other participants must begin with “Yes, and...” An example of the game might be,

“Jill sat on the stump and soaked up the sunshine.”

“Yes, and a mosquito landed on her arm, pulling her attention away from the sky.”

“Yes, and she lazily swatted the mosquito.”

“Yes, and...”

You get the idea. The game is intended to encourage genuine listening and acceptance of each other’s ideas with an emphasis on collaboratively creating a narrative or scene. Like most drama “games”, the “Yes, And...” game can be played productively or quite pointlessly. It all depends on the side-coaching, feedback and the intention of the teacher. Can the responder sense the tone or the rhythm of what has come before? Can they dilate moments within the narrative or image, honouring details and depth? Some improvisors impose a tone or a narrative on the sequence that isn’t responsive to what has come before. They can play the game without really listening or accepting “what is.”

I mention this game because most people know it and know that the fundamental principle of the game is *acceptance*, and it is the idea of acceptance that I want to talk about in relationship to teaching.

Teaching must come from a place of *acceptance*. It shouldn’t be predicated on a deficit model. This is hard to avoid when learning outcomes are understandably determined because of what the student doesn’t know, and lessons are designed to bridge the gap between deficit (lack of skill or knowledge) to abundance (acquiring skill or knowledge). But the learning encounter itself doesn’t begin in deficit. Everything within the space holds all that is necessary to move forward. How can it be otherwise? The student is exactly where they need to be to learn, and the teacher is exactly where they need to be to teach. The teaching

improvisation starts with this *acceptance* and moves forward from a place of listening and responding to “what is.”

This idea sounds obvious when I write it here, but after decades of teaching and directing, I still sometimes enter the classroom or the theatre as a frightened improviser might enter an improvisation: with my schtick. I impose on the narrative in a way that doesn't really flow from what the students are giving me to work with. I might do this because I am feeling tired after a hard day and it allows me to teach on autopilot, or I might do this because I don't really know what the lesson is about so it's easier to simply make it about keeping people busy with activities.

When I am guiding my students through my schtick (which sometimes consists of very cool progressions and exercises), I am not really improvising with my students. They are only participating in the learning encounter as deficit contributors. I am not responsive to tone, mood, rhythm or content of my students. As a teacher I am not subjecting myself to moments of unknowing. Such moments frighten me, so I remain in control by using a lesson plan that doesn't leave any room for the students' (unplanned) contribution.

These learning experiences are never as effective nor as deep as the ones I start by taking a good look at where my students are at (that day) and improvising accordingly. I have a plan, of course, but that is just the container for the improvisation. I can't completely control the lesson, because my students are the other participants in the improvisation. Something palpably shifts when students believe that who they are in that moment, and what they know or do in that moment, is *accepted*. In fact, what they do is exactly what it is needed in order to move to the next moment, and so on, through the learning improvisation. Again, how can it be otherwise?

While I am discussing the kind of *acceptance* that underpins improvisation and the moment-to-moment teaching and learning relationship, I can also zoom out to see how *acceptance* underpins whole teaching and artistic careers. When I was in my mid-20s, I taught dance, acting and television at a performance high school in Edmonton. After two years of working with hundreds of students, I realized that I was more interested in the art of performance than I was in the art of teaching. I realized that guiding students forward from their place of knowing was less interesting to me than working with people who had already achieved a level of artistry. I wanted to engage creatively with trained artists to produce art that challenged and interested me. I quit teaching the next year and moved to Paris to study physical theatre. Although I didn't know it at the time, I somehow sensed that I wasn't teaching from a place of *acceptance*.

Over the past 30 years, I have heard countless teachers or directors lament the level of their students' or actors' understanding, skill, or preparedness. Lately this often includes grievances regarding cell-phone distractions, levels of literacy and resilience to hardship. In these cases, the teaching always begins in a state of judgement and frustration. If you can't accept the reality of your students or actors, then you are likely in the wrong place, or you misunderstand what constitutes your job. I don't teach high school anymore and I likely wouldn't enjoy it as much as university. I know I wouldn't be well suited to teaching eight-year-olds, so I don't. But within the university context, there is a very wide range of abilities, and my teaching practice accepts them all. This, however, requires a constant vigilance. I still often catch myself inwardly thinking that a student should be doing something other than what they are doing or that the lesson should be going differently. Whenever this happens, I try to return myself to the mantra "Accept what is. Stop resisting." In other words, "Yes, and...."

I have built countless lessons around these simple challenges. I have been in classes with master teachers who were able to see what a student actor was doing and were able to offer concise and penetrating feedback that was, at that

moment, exactly what the learner needed. It was humbling for me to see this and in those moments, I remember thinking to myself that it would be years before I could see (and teach) that well. I remember thinking that there were no shortcuts to *acceptance*, to not knowing, and to real improvisation in teaching. It took practice.