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APPLIED IMPROVISATION MAGAZINE



ROBERT POYNTON

Everything's Still an Offer

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

Making Friends with Chaos

BRIGHT SU

Improvisation is Zen in Western Context

HUMAN
INTELLIGENT
GENERATIVE
HOPEFUL

AIM HIGH

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A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE APPLIED IMPROVISATION NETWORK

I am excited to meet you here, in our very first issue of the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM). The AIM – as a membership product – serves Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) members. As a professional magazine, it represents AIN's collective work. As a flagship from AIN, it promotes Applied Improvisation in broad sectors and disciplines. My warm welcome to you!

As 2023 begins, I reflect on recent years' successes. AIN has reinvested in the organization, primarily around how we position ourselves as the leaders in Applied Improvisation.

An in-person Annual World Conference has been our flagship since AIN's founding in 2002. Then came 2020 and a global pandemic! Our virtual conference was born, and I am happy to announce that AIN has held two Virtual Conferences two years in a row. Plus, online Open Space has been running weekly ever since.

In 2021, AIN invested in an entirely new website www.appliedimprovisationnetwork.org to help us better serve and engage with our membership. And I am proud that we now have 500 paid members in 32 countries, and our professional membership is increasing each month. Our Facebook AIN group is 8,400 members strong. This growing

member engagement amplifies our profession beyond our previous reach. If you are not a member, **consider the benefits and join**.

There's not a day where I don't hear "applied improvisation" and the impact of its application. We are no longer some kind of best-kept secret.

You are witnessing another flagship – AIM – being born! In this first issue, the magazine team showcases their writing, artwork, and design talents. I encourage you to share the content with your colleagues and friends. Also, consider ordering **print-on-demand copies from www.magcloud.com/user/appliedimprovisationmagazine** and sharing them with clients.

Happy New Year! Welcome to the AIN Family.



ED REGGI
AIN BOARD PRESIDENT

Ed Reggi is a lifelong storyteller. He's originally from New York City and moved to Chicago's The Second City, which led him to work with Paul Sills for over a decade. Today he's faculty at Lindenwood University and the Center of Creative Arts (COCA) in St. Louis, Missouri. Reggi joined the AIN Board in 2018 and started serving as the President in 2021. edreggi@gmail.com

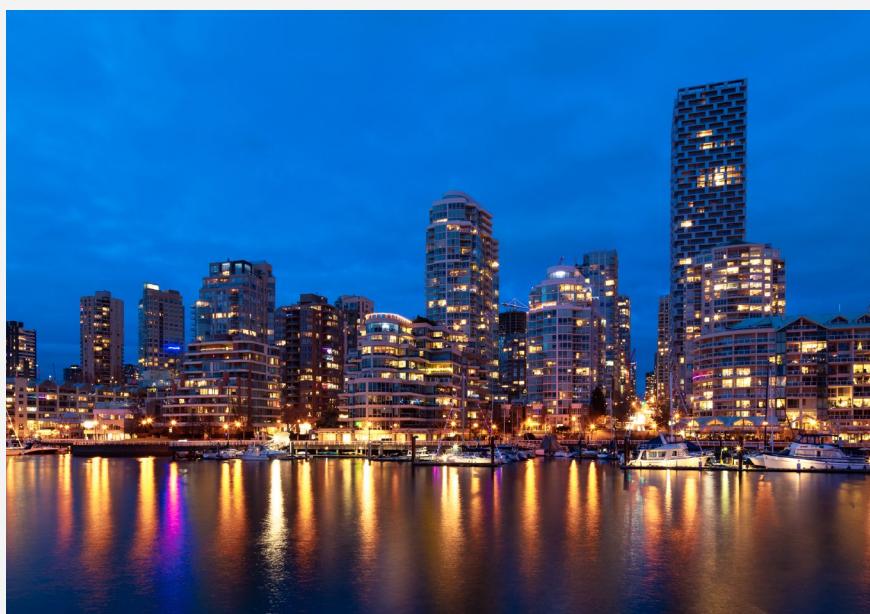
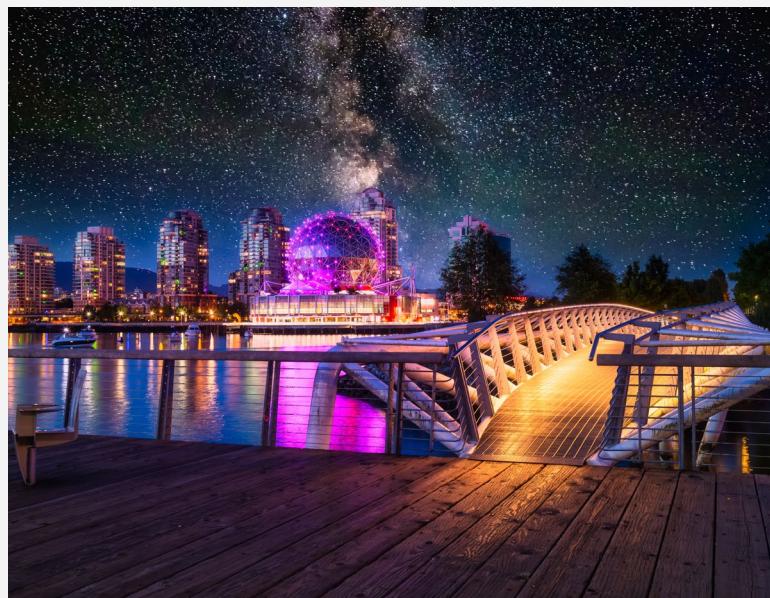
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SAVE THE DATES

Thursday, July 27, 2023 to Sunday, July 30, 2023

2023 AIN World Conference

(in person) at Vancouver, Canada



**WE ALSO WANT TO AIM HIGH.
HUMAN, INTELLIGENT, GENERATIVE, HOPEFUL.****HUMAN.**

As robots and another favourite AI (Artificial Intelligence) whisk us towards the Singularity (or not), perhaps we'll discover that the principles and practices of improvisation are what remain to us as distinctively human. We're talking creativity and collaboration; feelings and embodiment.

INTELLIGENT.

Improvisers, like other professionals, sometimes say silly things. Here we want to articulate and examine the concepts of improvisation as they are tested in real-world applications, beyond say the safe space of theatrical rehearsal studios. How well do our familiar tenets stand up to the scrutiny of business, political and humanitarian environments?

GENERATIVE.

Let's share ideas, case studies, news. Let's inspire each other into fresh intellectual and practical enterprises.

HOPEFUL.

And let's make those new enterprises inspiring, positive, inclusive and thoughtful.

As a reader, you are invited to 'Yes, And...' what you find here. Accept this as a starting point and Build it better by offering your support, whether that's an article for a future issue, a good question for one of the contributors or passing this along to others who may be interested.

WHY WE'RE AIMING HIGH

So here it is. Welcome to the very first issue of the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM).

What's the aim of the AIM? We want to articulate, research and promote what is going on in the emergent and growing field of Applied Improvisation. The magazine is written primarily by and for members of the Applied Improvisation

Network (the AIN), so we are leaning towards academic rigour and also to spreading the word to potential collaborators, clients and related professionals.

In practice, that means providing a forum for bright, accessible writing about all the many applications of improvisation.

WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE

Read Belina Raffy's case study of her work with the Inga Foundation in Honduras. Many of us knew we needed coffee to improvise well. Here we learn how coffee growers also need improvisation.

Our What's Hot section has Terje Brevik's report from the recent AIN conference in Avila, Spain, plus the editor's account of a seminal session there on the future of Applied Improvisation – We will be calling it Improvisation.

Spain conference chair Carla Vigara is profiled by Ilene Bergelson in this issue's AI Through My Eyes interview.

We have a giveaway! Yes, Robert Poynton reflects on writing his book, *Everything's An Offer*, which you can then download in full for free.

If you want to make friends with chaos – and frankly it's a pretty good choice – check out Patricia Ryan Madson's piece. Then Lisa Yeager reveals why A Scientist, a Project Manager and an Improviser Walk into a Zoo.

Ever faced your Inner Critic? Alex Leviton explores the improvisational riposte. Reporting from his classroom, Doug Shaw delves into the connections between Mathematics, Teaching, and Improvisation.

Continuing this more academic strand, Vicki Crooks introduces the AI in Education section, featuring

Dramas of Persuasion, an incisive reflection by Sally Harrison-Pepper.

Keen to research further and read more widely? You'll enjoy the valuable resource lists offered by Kay Ross, who explains her methods and processes. And Lukas Zenk reveals the main findings of his latest research project.

We'll be reviewing books about Applied Improvisation in our Bookshelf section. Is it all in the mindset – or do we need bodies too?

Three applied improvisers agreed to profile each other in turn: they are In The Spotlight. And one of them, Bright Su, also provides a touching memoir of his grandmother and her embodied connection to improvisation.

Let's get reading!

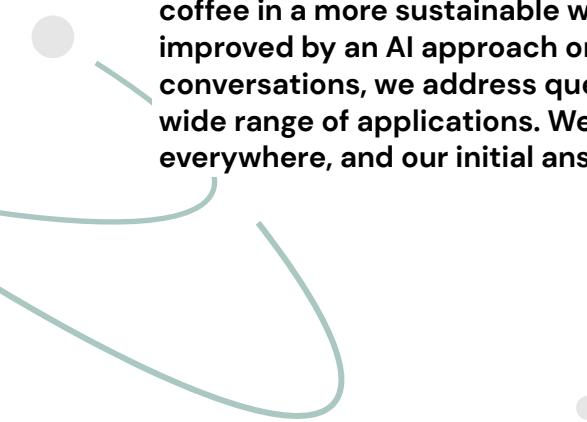


PAUL Z JACKSON
EDITOR

Co-founder of AIN, Paul is an organisational consultant, facilitator and trainer, based in Oxford, UK. Here he returns to his first profession as a journalist, to help launch this magazine. paul@impro.org.uk



WHERE



AI Everywhere was born of curiosity. This section explores how Applied Improvisation is used in different domains, by different people, all over the globe. Whether it is a story about growing coffee in a more sustainable way, exploring how math can be improved by an AI approach or how people can have better climate conversations, we address questions about how to learn from the wide range of applications. We wondered whether we could find AI everywhere, and our initial answer is a resounding "Yes, And..."

Viva La
Revolución!

FROM LEFT: BELINA
RAFFY, CHARO
LANAO AND AIDA
GUERREIRO BRITO



PHOTO COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

Words by
BELINA RAFFY

If we implement nature-based solutions, we need to improvise, as this case study (with coffee) reveals.

I am based in Berlin, where the public transportation is plentiful and regular, the tap water is safe to drink, and my most frequent encounter with local wildlife is while trying to feed hazelnuts to adorable and timid red squirrels.

The first time I went to Honduras was in December 2021. While there, I got hissed at by a giant boa constrictor I couldn't see (it was dark), bitten by numerous bugs (I am apparently delicious), and managed to pick up both influenza A and a parasite called Entamoeba histolytica.

The second time was in May 2022. I was only there for a week, and I managed to pick up the gut bacteria Helicobacter pylori which, if left untreated, could cause stomach ulcers and cancer. (My doctors and I treated it and I am now fine.)

I am about to go to Honduras for the third time in under a year. This time for six weeks. And I can't wait. What makes it worth it to me to visit this adventurous, wildly beautiful, transitioning narco-state with dangerous life forms big and small?

It's a chance for me to use and teach improvisation as a powerful technology to support a nascent nature-based revolution in the coffee industry. This work has the potential to transform land use and the well-being of smallholder coffee farmers' lives. These goals are especially attractive at a time when war by Russia is making traditional pesticides and fertilisers prohibitively expensive in Honduras, back-to-back climate crises are causing crop failure, and diminishing crop returns by exhausted soils are making many Central American smallholder farmers lose hope and join the precarious caravanas to seek a better life.

“ I fell in love with an amazing, rigorously scientifically-proven, and breathtakingly holistic nature-based agroforestry approach...”

The backstory

In July 2012, I went to the Frontline Club in London and watched a documentary called 'Up in Smoke' (not the Cheech and Chong film). Through that film, I fell in love with

an amazing, rigorously scientifically proven, and breathtakingly holistic nature-based agroforestry approach by the Inga Foundation, which gives farmers in the humid tropics a vibrant and truly regenerative alternative to 'slash and burn' farming. I kept in touch with them and was planning to visit their demonstration farm in Le Ceiba, Honduras in December 2021. Ten years on from the initial documentary film, their system was being replicated in 15 countries in the humid tropics. In Honduras, the Inga Foundation had 420 families who had embraced the system, with none returning to slash-and-burn practices. Those families were also responsible for planting over four million trees. And a community whose slash-and-burn farming had split a national park were now looking to rejoin the two sides of the park by embracing the Inga Foundation agroforestry system. On the fields that had been running the system for a while, long-gone freshwater springs were returning. In terms of SDGs, the Inga Foundation approach was positively addressing 11 of the 17 goals, with no negative impact on the other six.

In July 2021, I was approached by two fabulous ladies I knew, both working with an organisation called

'Bring on the Zoo' (BOTZ). For years, BOTZ had worked with Tchibo, a big German company, to help improve human rights conditions in supplier factories around the world.

As we all know, 2020 and 2021 were particularly difficult times with the global pandemic. To bring much-needed new energy and insights to their human rights facilitators around the world, the BOTZ ladies created a series of online workshops as part of their beautifully-titled, 'Summer of Love and Art,' and they asked me to run a workshop for them. I ran one in line with my book, *Using Improv to Save the World (and me)*. We focused on activities which create joyful connection, encourage listening and presence, and help us practice co-creation. They loved it.

" We focused on activities which create joyful connection, encourage listening and presence, and help us practice co-creation..."

In October 2021, the BOTZ ladies asked me to design and deliver a three-day online conference for the same group of trainers on working with power. For this, I decided to weave together three threads: improvisation, solutions focus, and an adaptation of a Quaker 'clearness committee' process. The experience was truly transformational and showed the power of what we can do to support each other through times of major change if we have the right processes, culture and approach.

One attendee in October, Tchibo's Aida Guerreiro Brito, had been instrumental in advancing the human rights work with the BOTZ ladies. She'd recently moved to the coffee section of Tchibo, where she was looking to transform both environmental sustainability and the quality of life of their smallholder coffee farmers.

I mentioned to Aida that I was going to be in Honduras in December, visiting the Inga Foundation, and she, the Inga Foundation, and I devised an experiment based on two questions. "What happens if we spend three days introducing key managers and agronomists within the Honduran coffee company Becamo (supplying Tchibo), to these collaborative, creative mindsets of improvisation, while they explore the Inga Foundation's nature-based approach? How might the approach support the transformation of the environmental impact and the livelihoods of their coffee farmers?"

Three confessions

First, I don't speak Spanish. (The company found me an awesome interpreter named Katia.)

Second, I had never worked with the Inga Foundation team before. (They were generously big-hearted and when we first met in person, we had a blue morpho butterfly dancing around our heads, which I took as a good omen.)

Third, Inga Foundation had never worked this way with a company before. (They were nervous about how potentially closed-minded

the agronomists from Becamo would be, as Inga Foundation is revolutionary in terms of traditional agriculture practices.)

Despite all that, the experiment in December 2021 paid off, and we realised something important. Not only were the participants from the coffee company excited to learn more about this nature-based solution, but they also noticed that the quality of conversations they had experienced, in large part created by the workshop design and culture of improvisation and engagement, was totally different from what happens when they run a typical training with their coffee farmers on new agricultural methods. Their traditional approach to training was relatively didactic and rigid.

I learned that a key to Inga Foundation's success at testing and adapting the implementation of this nature-based solution to over 420 families in Honduras was that the Inga team instinctively improvises - with each other, changing conditions and farmer wisdom. And they are very good at it - doing it with great care, integrity and compassion. If another company were to adopt and adapt their nature-based and people-based solutions, their trainers - in this case the coffee agronomists in Becamo - would have to improvise too, with their own coffee farmers.

So that was what happened in May 2022. I joined a wise, Ireland-based Peruvian facilitator named Charo Lanao to design and run a three-day Training of Trainers (ToT) for 15 Latinx agronomists (14 males and 1 female).



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

TOP LEFT: CHARO LANA, BELINA RAFFY AND KATIA TORRES

BOTTOM LEFT: ABRAHAM MARTINEZ, DIRECTOR OF FIELD OPERATIONS FOR INGA FOUNDATION, WITH ORGANIC COCOA FROM THE DEMONSTRATION FARM

TOP RIGHT: ON THE INGA FOUNDATION DEMONSTRATION FARM WITH THE COFFEE AGRONOMISTS

BOTTOM RIGHT, FROM LEFT: KELVIN BODDEN, ORNITHOLOGIST, AND THE INGA TEAM (LUIS MIRANDA, WILMER NUNIEZ, ELVIN MARTINEZ, ABRAHAM MARTINEZ AND MICHAEL HANDS) Elvin Martinez was killed two weeks after this picture was taken and his loss is still being felt and mourned by the Inga Foundation Team

On my way there, my comedy brain proposed a daunting thought. We were coming to Honduras to get some male Latinx agronomists (and one female) to sit in a circle, play games, and talk about their feelings. From the outside, I would have thought I was nuts.

But what happened blew us all away. The agronomists and their managers learned, adapted, and then owned the improvisational and facilitative methods.

On the first day, Charo and I introduced key concepts, including Charo's powerful invitation that a trainer also needs to be a facilitator and a learner. To support that ability to shift roles, we engaged the agronomists in some key improvisation activities, including a game in which we practiced discovering and acknowledging the value in each others ideas, and another game where we practiced holding space for each other to receive and spontaneously define delightful gifts from an imaginary box. A key skill in this latter game is that the holder of the imaginary box becomes a facilitator - they do not dictate what is in the box for the gift receiver, but suggests categories that the gift receiver gets stuck in their gift brainstorm.

On the second day, we focused on practices that helped us to identify and engage with different

perspectives, and we experienced approaches that nurtured our own curiosity and helped us to hold our own assumptions lightly. In the afternoon, as an extension of this practice, the agronomists prepared mini-workshops on a typical (for them) training topic. I attended one on pest control. The task was for the groups to cover the topic, but design and deliver it in a way that honoured being a trainer, facilitator, and learner. Traditionally, these topics would have been delivered only from the trainer perspective. The agronomists felt the difference - both as a person leading the mini-workshop, and as a role-play farmer. The engagement was very high and they could feel instantly how much more alive and useful the conversations were.

“What the agronomists did was powerful - they created refined mini-workshops designed to help everyone remember what their learning had been...”

On the third day, the founder and president of the company arrived by helicopter to see how the training was going. We did not know this was going to happen until the second day, and we were worried about the impact on participants of having the big boss come. What the agronomists did was powerful - they created refined mini-workshops designed to help everyone remember what their learning had been in our



PHOTO COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

FROM LEFT: ANNALENA VON RHEIN, NOEMI CABALLERO, AIDA GUERREIRO BRITO



ToT, by using and adapting the tools we had given them. As part of that, they re-introduced the gift box activity as it had been done, and then as a way for each participant to share a gift idea from our three days together.

Throughout the workshop, we gave the agronomists time to reflect and co-create their own ideal learning toolkit for what we were covering, so that they had something perfectly adapted to their own needs. After our ToT, they quickly refined this material into a living document with quotes, photos, and notes on the different models and activities that they wanted to remember.

In the follow-up meeting a month and a half later, their creative use of improvisation gave us all chill bumps. Now all meetings with farmers are in high-engagement circles.

The agronomists were improvising on the spot, holding their assumptions lightly, and creating processes to make it easy for farmers to raise their needs. The agronomists were even using methods like acknowledging the value in each others' ideas with their wives and children. (I think our three days in May made a lot of wives happier.)

Just after our time together in May, two of our participants headed into a training meeting with coffee farmers, and there were three times as many farmers as they expected.

They immediately invited people to form groups based on interest so that the design could be tailored to what people wanted to cover on the day. Something they had never done before our 3-day training.

Since then, Tchibo, Becamo and Inga Foundation have signed a contract. Now equipped with improvisation, the Becamo agronomists and some of their coffee farmers will be embedded for two weeks at a time with the Inga Foundation farms, so they can learn all of the practical and social approaches needed to make this nature-based, improvisation-supported revolution in coffee work.

Viva la revolución!



BELINA RAFFY

Belina helps people who work on environmental and social issues to collaborate more effectively, creatively, and lovingly with nature and each other. She is the collaboration coach for the science accelerator lab Frontier Development Lab. She created the global, compassionate, stand-up comedy course, *Sustainable Stand Up*. Belina giggles a lot because she loves what she does.

www.maffick.com
www.sustainablestandup.com
www.frontierdevelopmentlab.org
www.fdeurope.org







SHOT

Here we cover news and conferences – this time with personal reflections, a report from a session on the future of Applied Improvisation and pages of photos from AIN in SpAIN.





AIN in SpAIN - Let Me Explain...

Words by
TERJE BREVIK

Ávila, sometimes called the Town of Stones and Saints, is not just a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was also the venue for the Applied Improvisation Network conference in July 2022.

“The AIN conference gives us a chance to share our knowledge with each other in practical and efficient methods...”

AIN in SpAIN, get it?

Applied Improvisation is a practical approach to making all those wonderful things from improv theater available, accessible, and useful to non-improvisers – civilians – so they can benefit from the powerful tools of improvisation to connect, collaborate, and create. The AIN conference gives us a chance to

share our knowledge with each other in practical and efficient methods to train skills such as communication, group dynamics, psychological safety, innovation, problem-solving – the list goes on.

The new stuff

Each of the three days of the conference had a wide selection of workshops, lectures and AINx talks. Walking from one session to another felt like attending a smorgasbord of shared ideas and experiences. Topics, themes and shared stories included facilitation, service design, science communication, LGBTQ+ voices, ageism, mental health, storytelling, collaboration and research, to mention just a few (phew!).

It is impossible not to get inspired by the stories you hear or by participating in the many interactive

workshops. You'd be hard-pressed not to find something relevant.

One of my favorites was about the Philippine youth maker space VIVITA, presented by the wonderful Gabe Mercado, founder of **Third World Improv**. Watch the video on vivita.kiwi to get an idea of the awesome things they do.

The reassuring stuff

Starting an Applied Improvisation practice can be a lonely experience, especially in the beginning, as there are so many things you can't be 100% certain about. Defining your services, how much they're worth, how to sell them and client negotiations can be a long process of doubts, fears and uncertainty.

Then, at the conference, you meet people who've not only had similar challenges but also found

“It’s a great feeling and an amazing confidence boost, that can go both ways...”

solutions similar to yours. It’s a great feeling and an amazing confidence boost, that can go both ways. Because sometimes you’ve got an answer to someone else’s question, sometimes they have one for yours, and sometimes you find answers together.

Up until the 2019 AIN conference in Stony Brook, New York, I’d spent a frustrating amount of time and energy going back and forth with customers regarding price. I’d give them an offer based on what they gave me: number of people and length of the workshop. Then, these variables would always change. Thirty minutes had to be cut and four people would be unable to attend. The customer expected a new offer with the price reduced, and I felt obliged to comply.

At Stony Brook, I learned how to offer either half-day or full-day workshops with a set price for a set number of people, and how to word my offer to clients: “Yes, it works with a smaller group, but the content and price is the same. Yes, we can shave off an hour and give you the ‘best of’ version, but the price is the same.”

The people!

The people you’re meeting for the first time... The people you’ve met before... And sometimes, in my case, the people you’ve met before but you’re not capable of remembering (thanks, prosopagnosia).

Heck, I’ll even throw in the people I didn’t get to meet. I heard so much about what other people were doing, I’m already looking forward to our next conference when we can finally meet.

I attended many seminars and conferences in my previous career as an IT engineer and consultant, but rarely did I meet the same passion, support, and enthusiasm as here! That even includes after the conference.

A meeting in Madrid

A week after the conference ended, I was sightseeing in Retiro Park in nearby Madrid. I heard someone call something that sounded very much like my very Nordic and very unusual name. But that was impossible. This was my first time ever in this city.

It was José, from the conference. He was out on a Sunday stroll with his family, spotted me, and wanted to say hi. He then introduced me to his delightful family, and we spent 15 minutes chatting. We then said goodbye and walked our separate ways into the massive El Retiro. This

is the kind of encounter I wouldn’t have had except for the connections we make and the experiences we share at AIN conferences around the world.

Ávila had enough stones to build an impressive city wall and enough churches to host many a saint. It is also where a kaleidoscope of us AIN butterflies gathered for a few days to flap our wings. The ripple effects of surprise and opportunities are just getting started in revealing themselves to us. Like unexpectedly bumping into a friend in an unknown metropole of 3.4 million inhabitants abroad.

I’m excited to find out; what comes next?



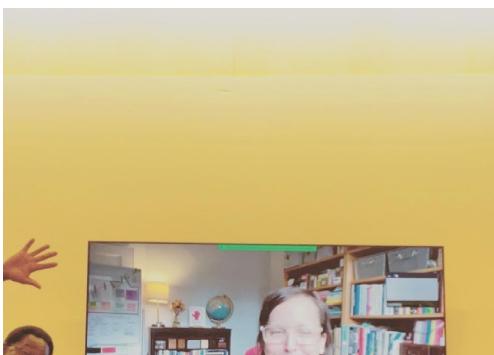
TERJE BREVIK

Terje Brevik teaches methods from improvised theater to teams and individuals who want to improve communication, collaboration, and creativity, on or off stage.



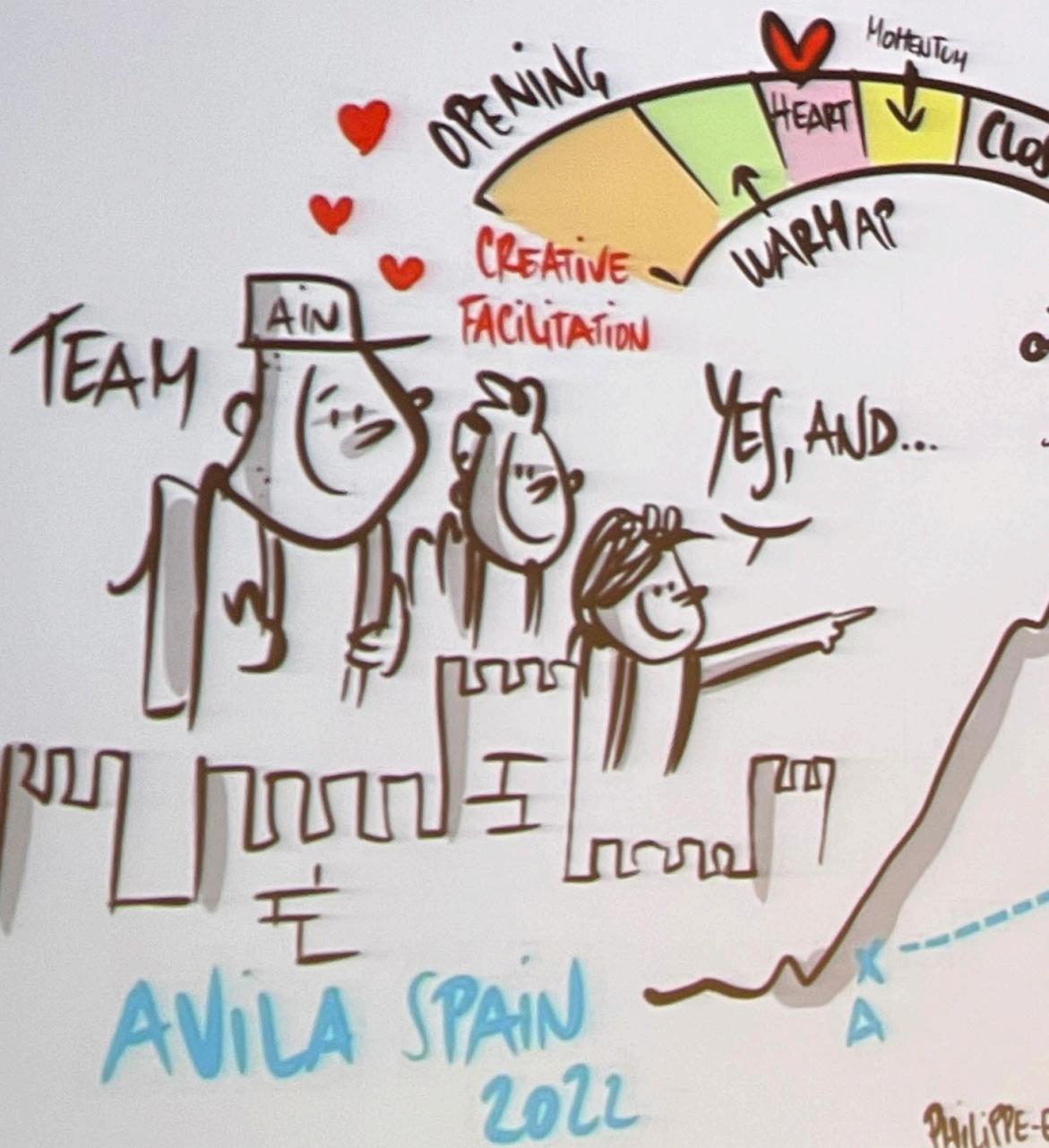
PHOTO COURTESY OF TERJE BREVIK

WHAT'S HOT





FACILITATION IS...



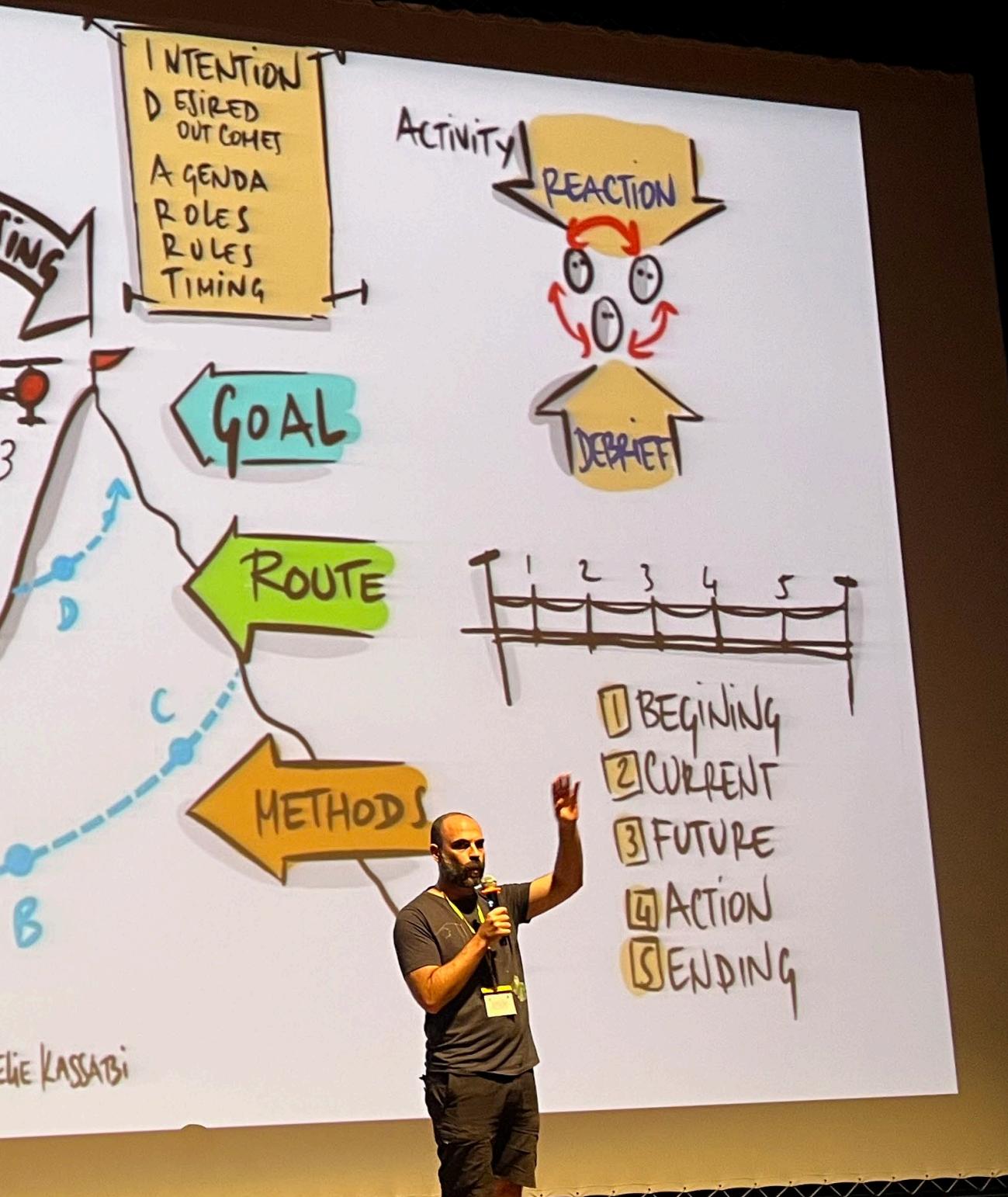


PHOTO COURTESY OF AIN

BOOKS



SHELF

Books are more patient than most people. They understand us and bind us together as authors, readers and reviewers. They break the shackles of locale and time.

In this issue, we have author Robert Poynton reflecting on writing his own book, while Paul Z Jackson reviews *The Applied Improvisation Mindset*.



Everything's Still An Offer

Words by
ROBERT POYNTON

I wrote *Everything's An Offer* for one person - me. I wrote to make sense of what I was learning, to try to get my arms around how the ideas and practices embodied by improvisers on stage connect with the messy, everyday realities of ordinary life and work. Writing is hard and that is what makes it a powerful discipline. It forced me to clarify my thinking and give my ideas a solid grounding.

“I am finding things, not creating them; as if I were wandering along a beach...”

In a context like Oxford University, where I began to work in 2002, that helped. I knew that having a book would give me at least a fig leaf of respectability, even if no-one ever read it. What I didn't anticipate was how the writing process would show up in me. Had I burned the manuscript before anyone saw it, it would still have been worthwhile, because the writing enabled me to speak with a different kind of authority and confidence about something which, at the time, seemed ridiculous to many.

It took a while - I was working on *Everything's an Offer* from 2002 to 2008, though much of what I was doing in the first couple of years I would now call research rather than writing.

Energy and interests

This was partly because I had a young family and a nascent business, but also because I had no idea what I was doing. So I started by starting and learned by doing.

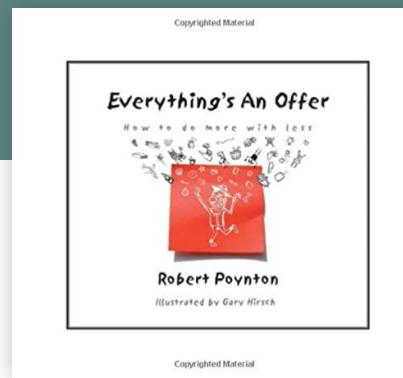
I wrote it out of order, following my energy and interests, rather than a plan. I let the structure emerge from the writing, rather than writing

to fill in a structure. The process was punctuated by moments of inspiration that I couldn't possibly have anticipated. For example, I vividly remember, one stoking hot summer afternoon in Avila, Spain, when I found the first sentence, and with it the elusive voice on which so much hinges. That was like understanding 'the game within the game' and unlocked things in a magical way.

I say 'found' because that is how writing feels to me - I am finding things, not creating them; as if I were wandering along a beach picking up and discarding words like pebbles, until I find the ones I like.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT POYNTON



Get your free copy of
Everything's An Offer

DOWNLOAD

It is personal

It is a very personal book. One agent described it as “long-winded and talky” and I can see why she thought so. But plenty of people like that. Those who know me say it is like having a conversation and prefer it to the more pared-down book, *Do Improvise*.

“A book is an extension of yourself...”

A book is an extension of yourself, like a search algorithm or radioactive marker, that takes your ideas out into the world and makes connections with other people and ideas. *Everything's an Offer* brought me some of my closest friends.

Once written, books stay written, so they can have a long life, which, like any life, can be full of surprises. When it came out a number of people told me how it helped them through a bout of mental illness, something I neither imagined nor intended. And recently I discovered that the chapter on status is being used as a set text in a business school where I have never worked, by someone I have never met.

Looking back at the text now, it is amazing to me how much is in it. It is packed with ideas and images – from ‘control addiction’ to a discussion of embodied and tacit knowledge – many of which I had forgotten about. Some of it feels prescient. The model has stood the test of time (and two editions of *Do Improvise*), though now I draw it as a Venn diagram, not a triangle.

I am not sure if this is depressing or inspiring. On the one hand it reminds me there are deep, robust patterns at work, which I have been interested in and working with for over twenty years and will probably continue to be fascinated with until I die. Which is reassuring. But in my more vulnerable moments it makes me feel like I haven’t learned anything at all.

An invitation to explore

I invite you to read it in the same spirit that I wrote it. As an exploration. Start in the middle, or at the end. Dip into it. Open on a random page. Scan the contents page to find a theme or piece of practice you are curious about or working with. Use the index (or the search function on a pdf) to look up

what I have to say about Margaret Atwood, the relaxation response, *Toy Story* or anything else that takes your fancy.

I am going to do something similar: in future editions of this magazine I will pick out a passage and comment on it from my current perspective. We can take the title literally and use anything and everything within it as an offer, and see where that takes us.

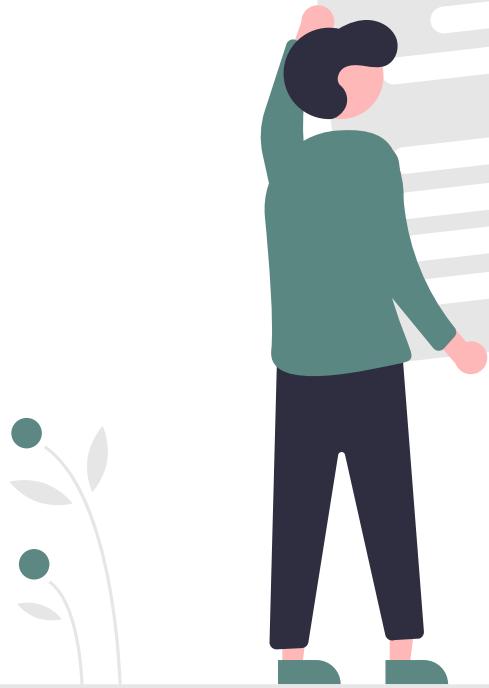


ROBERT POYNTON

Rob's work is a lifelong improvisation. He left London to work in Madrid, only to move to Argentina. A chance meeting with Gary Hirsch led to an improvisation-based business (On Your Feet) that thrives today. Another unplanned twist led to Oxford University's Said Business School (where he is an Associate Fellow). He has worked with companies such as PwC, the BBC and Merck. He has taught at Schumacher College and Singularity University.

Rob is the author of *Everything's An Offer*, *Do Improvise* and *Do Pause*.
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www.theeverydayimproviser.com
www.robertpoynton.com.

PERSP



PECTIVE

In the PERSPECTIVE section, you'll find pieces that explore the range of ways in which we imagine AI principles shaping our lives. In this issue, you can examine the influence of our inner critic, embrace chaos and discover the Zen connection between AI and green beans. In our regular column, AI Through My Eyes, practitioners share sources of inspiration, experience and insight. PERSPECTIVE invites you to challenge our perceptions and expand our vision.



AI Through My Eyes

Spotlight on
CARLA VIGARA

Where to see more of Carla:
vivirsinguion.com // witimpro.com



Home base location (town, country):

Madrid, Spain.

You may know her as the Conference Chair for AIN 2022 in Avila... and in 2020...

Where/what/how or with whom do you use Applied Improvisation?

I use it everywhere, with everyone (family and friends included). I created the first Degree in Applied Improvisation in a Spanish university. In schools and as part of the Madrid Pride festival, mainly applied to prevent bullying; in the corporate world, applied to communication, speaking in public, conflict resolution, adaptation to change, creativity, teamwork, leadership and giving and receiving feedback for companies.

Fun fact:

I can't avoid counting the tiles of every bathroom I go to. But first I make a guess. And then I count.

What are some of your favorite themes to explore through AI?

Conflict resolution. Because it requires greatly enhancing listening, empathy, putting yourself in the other person's shoes and really understanding their motives. Why does each person want what they want?

What about AI do you think is or can be challenging?

It is a challenge to sell it using the word "improvisation". But, at the same time, I don't want to stop using it. If we never use it when selling or we change the name of the workshop from "Applied Improvisation to Team Building" to "Team Communication Effectiveness in the Corporate Setting," it may sound better to clients. But then we will have to start over and over again to explain what it is. I prefer to insist on using the term "Applied Improvisation" so that, little by little, it becomes known. That it is a tool, a concept, a philosophy of life and work.

“Teachers usually warn me with comments such as
“This year’s group is impossible”, “It’s going to be tough
for you to take anything out of them”. And it never is...”

How is AI a source of inspiration to you? What else does it add to your life?

I am a better person since I use Applied Improvisation in my personal life. In my personal relations with friends and family. With my students. When raising my children. I used to be more volcanic and reflect less than I do now. That is always helpful. What inspires me? I don’t know anyone who hasn’t benefited from Applied Improvisation. You can literally see the change in people happening in front of you in a matter of seconds. Maybe this is an exaggeration, maybe it’s minutes ;-)

What’s one AI activity you love to do/lead/share? Why?

Status dynamics. Sort by randomly assigned status, for example. I love when I see that sparkle in the eyes of the participants. When they understand how it works. When they realize it is so simple. And at the same time so complex.

Which communities do you most enjoy bringing AI to and why?

To children and teenagers. I feel that it is of great help to them. That you are really providing them with a useful tool for their personal development at all levels. I feel they feel heard. When I work in schools or universities, teachers usually warn me with comments such as “This year’s group is impossible”, “It’s going to be tough for you to take anything out of them”. And it never is. Give me two seconds (maybe this is an exaggeration, give me two minutes ha-ha) to show you. It is in the eyes of those who look at them. Pretty obvious to say this but still, the children of today will be the adults of tomorrow.

Is there someplace new for you that you’d like to use/take AI?

I have never used AI in humanitarian crisis contexts. I know it is done. And I would like to. So that would be “someplace new” just for me. I would like to take it to the governments of countries across the globe. So that we can be a little more surprised by their inability to reach agreements.



Interview by
ILENE BERGELSON

Ilene Bergelson is a presenter, educator and executive coach inspired by the principles of Applied Improvisation. Through her company, EmpowerSpeak™, she draws on best practices from AI, as well as her long career in the performing arts and coaching. Ilene has written numerous articles, created the audio series, *Light Bytes: The Communication Collection* and contributed to professional development books on career, presence and mindfulness themes. www.empowerspeak.com

Making Friends With Chaos

Words by

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

“You can count on chaos,” I intone as we start a round of messy, loud games that involve throwing imaginary sound balls. No one likes the feeling of all this noise and disorder. A common response (especially from engineers ;-) is to ‘fix’ this untidy situation by invoking rules or controls that slow down the mess and work to turn the chaos into some kind of manageable order. This is human nature. Why not control what we can? That’s what humans do. That’s civilization.

“ Precisely what improvisation teaches: how to live vibrantly in a field of flux, an office of uncertainty, even an apartment of landmines...”

There is another response to chaos. Live with it. Accept its unstable condition. Work inside of the teetering mass. Embrace the wobble.

Remember when you were trying to learn to ride a bicycle? My first response was to “screw on the training wheels,” so that I could make the thing stable. We all know that this is simply a quick fix and does not address the real issue: learning how to go with the delicate balance of the two-wheeler. And, think about it: when we’ve mastered the two-wheel bike and we zoom

along seemingly ‘in control’, the reality is that the wobble - that instability - is still there. We are simply riding it using a new awareness of what it means to be always balancing. The body sense of being poised is in constant play.

To study improvisation is to study the ‘kinhin’ (the body knowledge) of living inside an unknown and unknowable future, gliding along, using the resources at hand to do something useful or artful. Pema Chödrön said it well in advising her readers: instead of trying to get away from the discomfort of the unknown we should develop an aptitude for what she calls “positive groundlessness, or positive insecurity.” There is wisdom in insecurity.

“We need to develop an appetite for groundlessness; we need to get curious about it and be willing to pause and hang out for a while in that space of insecurity,” she said. Pema Chödrön titled her book *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*. This seemingly-abstract dictum is precisely what improvisation teaches: how to live vibrantly in a field of flux, an office of uncertainty, even an apartment of landmines. We cannot let this not-knowing paralyze us. We need to stay in motion, in constructive action during this groundlessness.

We do not know or need to know what comes next. We create it. And we have a choice in how we enter this present. Much has been written about mindfulness, or waking up to the “present moment.” Dr. David K.



Reynolds once quipped, “What other moment is there?”

I’m a great believer in making friends with uncertainty, becoming familiar with groundlessness, and coming to have a deep acquaintance

with the fluctuating pulse of everyday life. Sounds good. What does this really mean?

In checking a dictionary of synonyms, I find a full page, more



than 500 words that are synonymous with uncertainty. It's likely this not-knowing, the notion of risk, of mutability is precisely where we find ourselves all the time. The charitable void of the unknown is the field in which improvisation lives.

Getting to accept that life is uncertain is an easy sell. The hard part is to get us to study a way of abiding with chaos. Instead of interfering, we develop those muscles that accommodate the flow. Enter improvisation training, improvisation philosophy. Acceptance.

We need to do more than give lip service to Pema Chödrön's dictum to hang with groundlessness. We need tools and strongholds during the assault. Improvisation offers this ordinary advice: Breathe, pay attention, stay positive, shift your focus from yourself to what's happening out there, and then follow your first impulse to add something constructive. What could be simpler? Not!

Lisa Rowland, who teaches improvisation at Stanford University, said it this way: "I think the improvisors' art is the art of responding. The grand misconception is that improvisors are quick thinkers, and that our training goes to becoming quicker and more agile. It's true in a way, but really the skill that improvisors cultivate is the skill of responding/reacting: taking what is there and using it generatively. And sometimes the offers we pick aren't even intended as offers. Armed only with the basic assumption that whatever comes

our way is worth engaging, worth playing with, we are able to spin any input into something alive and joyful and unexpected. Part of that skill is paying attention, so that we notice what's coming at us. Another part is letting go of what we wish that offers were or what we thought they would be. The third part is raising the offer up, elevating it, so it might be transformed, bit by bit, into something delicious. Or at least something new."

([Facebook, May 10, 2015](#))

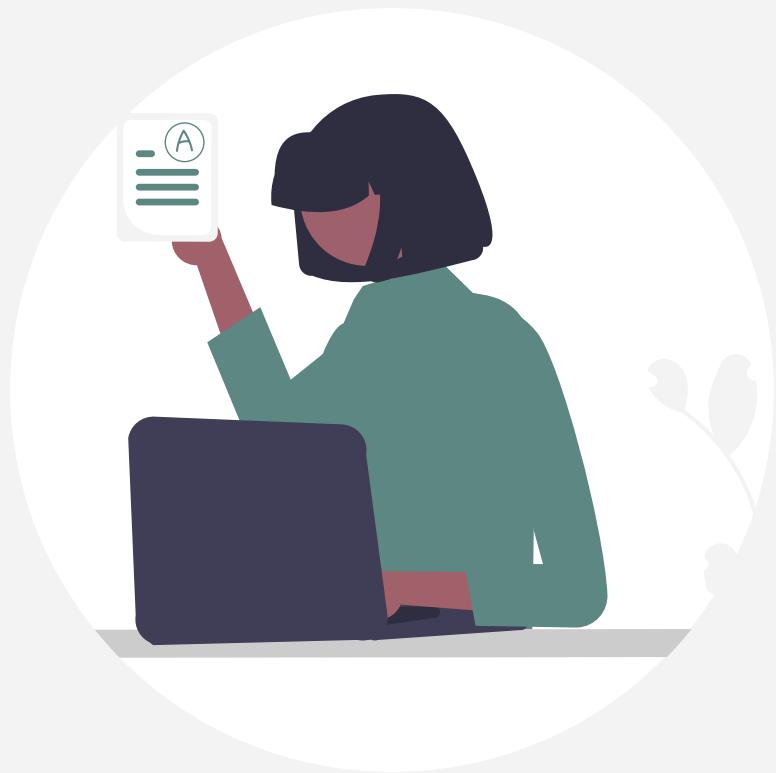
Those of us fortunate enough to be involved in the teaching and coaching of improvisation have a valuable gift for the world. We can cope with the chaos of today using these tools of improvisation.



PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

Patricia Ryan Madson is the author of *IMPROV WISDOM: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. Patricia is Emerita from Stanford, where she served as the head of the undergraduate acting program. In 1998 she was the winner of the Lloyd W. Dinkelpiel Award for Outstanding Innovation in Undergraduate Education at Stanford. www.improvwisdom.com

AI IN EDUCATION



Teachers of Flexibility

An Introduction and an Invitation

Words by

VICKI CROOKS

Welcome to this section, designed to provide insights, examples, and dialogue related to the research, teaching, and practice of Applied Improvisation in Education. We

envision this as a forum for sharing how Applied Improvisation is being used in K-12,

colleges, universities, and professional schools.

“We want to invite you to submit your stories, article ideas, and questions...”

Coming from a range of backgrounds, situations, and disciplines, academics around the globe are not only using Applied Improvisation in classrooms, but they are also conducting research, writing, presenting, and collaborating to ensure that the practice and principles of Applied Improvisation continue to gain credence at our schools and institutions.

We want to celebrate and support that work by providing this forum. We are interested in highlighting the ways teachers and practitioners representing diverse academic backgrounds approach and promote this work. We will feature

summaries of academic articles, include insights from individuals who design and teach courses that include Applied Improvisation, and share case studies and stories about our experiences. Hopefully, this will also become a place for exchanging activities, asking questions, and inviting collaboration.

As teachers, researchers, and improvisers, we can make the most of this resource, using it to exchange ideas and strategies, to become informed by cross-disciplinary influences, and to gain fresh insights for our own work. Perhaps more importantly, if sharing our experiences and our research can equip us to improve current approaches to education, our time will be well spent.

As editors for this Applied Improvisation in Education section, we want to invite you to submit your stories, article ideas, and questions. We are college professors from different disciplines, and we teach in different universities. Nancy is a professor of behavioral science at a university in Missouri. I, Vicki, teach relational and organizational communication at a polytechnic university in Oregon. I have also taught at the K-12 level. We want to invite those of you doing important work in any educational context to reach out to us.

In a report sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, David J. Skorton, Chair of the Committee on Integrating Higher Education in the Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, suggests that our current narrow educational focus has left students without the necessary learning outcomes of critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and other “human skills” that are essential even, or especially, in high-tech fields (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). What Skorton is describing is the need to develop flexible thinkers who have had an integrative educational experience.

Applied Improvisation can help. Equipping students to become flexible thinkers involves implementing more holistic and flexible learning processes (Rayner & Cools, 2012). The earlier that training in creativity and flexible thinking starts, the better. AI does just that, helping students develop habits of creativity and learning flexibility with activities that involve experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and applying.

We, as applied improvisers within the field of education, have something important to contribute. In fact, we could lead these efforts to reform and reshape education. Learning from each other is a great way to start. We invite your participation and look forward to what is possible together.



Dramas of Persuasion

Words by

SALLY HARRISON-PEPPER

Spending a career in academia may have been an accident, a curse, or more likely a miraculous work of serendipity. I was a terrible student in high school, hostile to rote learning, exams and grades. I was repeatedly told I was “not college material.” I even failed third grade. So, and why not, I found a career in theater, performance art, and improvisation.

My path to the ivory tower began when I sensed there were some foundational cracks in the 1970’s theater work I was doing. It felt incomplete, unfulfilled, as if the meaning and value of traditional theater was missing something, or was at least misdirected. But what? My quest to find what I did not yet understand had begun, a quest based upon “I’ll know it when I see it.”

Somehow, this unconventional learner nevertheless managed to get degrees in Comparative Religion and then in Anthropology. While these were useful foundational steps, I still knew “That’s not it.” And then, a random stroll through a bookstore revealed the touchstone to my quest: Richard Schechner and Mady Schuman’s book: *Ritual, Play, and Performance: Readings in the Social Sciences/Theatre* (1976). “This,” I thought, “is it. This is my goal.”

Schechner and Schuman’s book, with its array of powerful essays on *Habit, Ritual and Magic* (Schaller), *Ritual and Performance in Everyday*

Life (Birdwhistell), *Shamanism, Trance and Meditation* (Anisimov), *Desert Rituals and the Sacred Life* (Grotowski), even *The Chest Beating Sequence of the Mountain Gorilla* (Lawick-Goodall), and many more, prompted me to track down Schechner, and then manage to study and work with him at New York University.

“As an unconventional learner myself, I knew it was especially important to undo the enforcement of students as passive learners...”

Soon, beyond the rigorous theoretical materials at the center of Schechner’s work, I was also given opportunities to learn with many of the distinguished theater makers in his circle, from Augusto Boal to Eugenio Barba to Jerzy Grotowski and more. In this way, the idea of combining social science theory and performance practice began to take root.

My journey with Schechner concluded with yet another mostly-unsought degree, a Ph.D. in Performance Studies, which ultimately landed me in the School of Interdisciplinary Studies at Miami University in 1988. Recognizing the eclectic skill set of their new colleague, they quickly

assigned me to an area they called “Creativity and Culture.” Soon learning that I was determined to combine theory and practice, social science and performance in my courses, my colleagues enthusiastically supported me. Many even participated in the array of interdisciplinary courses I created. Their support and willingness to defend me against a more conservative, rule-bound administration enabled me to develop the methodology I came to call “Dramas of Persuasion.”

As I sought to develop, defend and secure my teaching methods, I discovered many supportive interdisciplinary materials. My notion of combining theory and practice in the classroom was given additional academic validation, for example, by Victor and Edith Turner, who had published the results of a methodology they called “performing ethnography” in *The Drama Review* in 1982.

Victor Turner, an anthropologist, had sought ways to introduce his students to ethnographic accounts of varying cultures by adding performative experiences that would “aid students’ understanding of how people in other cultures experience the richness of their social existence.” He and Edith Turner devised workshops in which students could “try on” behavior and get kinetic understandings of “other” sociocultural groups (1982: 34).

I also admired Barbara Myerhoff's work on secular ritual, in which she described how rituals are embodied—literally learned in the body—as behaviors or actions that gradually shape one's views or attitudes. In Myerhoff's view, "Action is indicated because rituals persuade the body first; behaviors precede emotions in the participants" (1977: 199).

As an unconventional learner myself, I knew it was especially important to undo the enforcement of students as passive learners. Paulo Freire, in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), called such passive learning a "banking" model of education, in which instructors place their knowledge into supposedly empty student receptacles. I instead focused on "critical doing" (Grady, 1992: 15), combining challenging theoretical and analytical course materials with performative and experientially-based experiences designed to generate kinetic experiences of the often-abstract concepts we ask students to think, talk, and write about.

Engaging both the head and the heart of students lets them experience their learning within themselves in more profound and meaningful ways than the readings alone could possibly provide. Thus, a course on Women and Theatre, with a wide array of readings in feminist

theory, also included improvisational exercises designed to give bodily experiences and illuminate issues of power and gender for further study and discussion.

One of my earliest experiments took place in a course I created on "Ritual, Play, and Performance." I began the course with a focus on play, and assigned readings on play from Johan Huizinga, Gregory Bateson, Mihalyi Cziksentmihalyi, and more. When students arrived in class they were invited to actually play an array of childhood games.

Students had read that play stands "quite consciously outside 'ordinary'

life as being 'not serious,' but still absorbing the player intensely and utterly" and that it "proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" in Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955). In the classroom we played a game of *Red Light, Green Light*, led by my colleague Gene Metcalf. Before class, I had asked him to cheat (at times quite obviously), and yet the game proceeded without challenge. In the discussion afterward, I asked students why they had tolerated Metcalf's ridiculous demands and rulings.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SALLY HARRISON-PEPPER

“The idea that learning theoretical material could actually be enjoyable amazed many of these first-year students...”

One student reminded us that Huizinga had said a cheater who pretends to be playing a game will often be allowed to play simply so that the other players can preserve the play world and their community of players. Another student brought out her copy of Huizinga’s book and noted that play “demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it ‘spoils the game,’ robs it of its character and makes it worthless” (32). Students soon realized and agreed that they tolerated Metcalf’s cheating because it “averted a disruption of the game’s order.” They had experienced Huizinga’s idea that maintaining the rules of order that make play possible were more important than challenging a cheater. And they realized that they had fun making this discovery.

The idea that learning theoretical material could actually be enjoyable amazed many of these first-year students. “I had so much fun in the class,” one student remarked, “that I couldn’t believe I was in college... After the experience was over, I looked back at how I had experienced [Csikszentmihalyi’s] flow while trying to get a plastic object out of a cardboard box without buzzing the metal on the side. The game of *Operation* for ages

5 and up helped me to understand flow. Can you imagine that? I couldn’t until that day.”

A colleague at Miami University, educational theorist Peter McLaren, shared his ideas, described in *Schooling as Ritual Performance* (1986) as conceptual links between ritual and education, and confirmed the links I repeatedly found in my classrooms. The experiential workshops provided a dynamic cultural arena for the exploration and presentation of issues important to a particular course, yet the necessary expressive behaviors for learning about a wide range of subjects—from history to physics to economics—already existed in classrooms. Experiential activities simply helped students use their bodies as well as their minds as important interdisciplinary tools.

Performative pedagogy thus offers ways to locate and provide deep learning opportunities throughout the curriculum. A collection of relatively simple exercises, informed by theory, can connect students to the transformative

“freedom” that Freire advocates in his pedagogy. It can prove that students’ bodies contain vital tools for learning in meaningful and memorable ways. As Myerhoff said, “Action is indicated because rituals [and classrooms containing rituals] persuade the body first.”

“It can prove that students’ bodies contain vital tools for learning in meaningful and memorable ways...”

After publishing several articles about my pedagogy and receiving a few years’ worth of outstanding student evaluations for my eccentric work in the classroom, I received Miami University’s “Teacher of the Year” award in 1993. As part of the award, I was asked to give a presentation, which I (wrongly) assumed would be for the students and alumni who were part of the ceremony. I thought about potential speeches and rejected each of them — speeches would be the opposite of



why I was receiving this award. So, I decided I would have the gathered students play a game, and chose a card game in which students put playing cards on their foreheads, without looking at the number, and then wander around as if they are at a party, giving clues to each other about one another's numbers. It is a game that reveals notions of hierarchy, status, stereotyping, even tolerance and oppression, in often profound ways, in both the playing and the debrief afterward.

When I arrived at the ceremony, I immediately realized that there were, in fact, no students in the audience. Instead, I saw the new President of the university, a man I had not yet met; the Provost, who was also relatively new to the university; several Deans and department chairs, and even the new football coach (a revered position at our Division I university). And there I was, with a deck of cards and no prepared remarks. Fear was followed by "Hey, this is why I received this award. So, I'm going to make them play this game!" I explained the process and distributed the cards, certain that this game would not go over as usual, but nevertheless convinced that it was why I was there.

I watched as the President drew an Ace and put it on his forehead, and breathed a sigh of relief. He was going to have a good time. The new football coach drew a Deuce. Oh boy... this should be interesting. Fortunately, all in attendance were soon gleefully engaged in

the game. As I strolled around the room, watching and doing a bit of coaching, I saw the President, with that Ace on his forehead, march up to the new coach and say, while looking at the coach's Deuce: "Well, you're just lucky to be here, that's all," and walk away. The coach's perplexed expression indicated he was likely thinking "Was that the game, or did he really mean that?" The Provost, with a six on her forehead, was clearly frustrated. In the debrief afterward, she said "I'd rather have been a low card, or a high one. I hated being a middle card" — useful information for future dealings with a key decision-maker and funding-provider at the university. There was, in fact, much to process in the debrief, and it all turned out well. Future support and awards from the President-with-an-ace and the Provost-with-a-six continued until I retired in 2015.



SALLY HARRISON-PEPPER, PH.D.

Sally Harrison-Pepper, Ph.D., is Professor Emeritus of Interdisciplinary Studies, Theatre, and Women's Studies at Miami University of Ohio. She is the author of *Drawing a Circle in the Square: Street Performing in New York City's Washington Square Park* (University Press of Mississippi, 1991) and is also the creator and editor of a Performance Studies series for the University Press of Mississippi.

Note: You can find more detailed discussions of these courses and activities in my articles, *Dramas of Persuasion: Utilizing Performance in the Classroom in the Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, Volume 2, 1991* and *Dramas of Persuasion: Performance Studies and Interdisciplinary Education in Theatre Topics, Volume 9, Number 2, September 1999*.

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The Inner Critic Comes Knocking

Words by
ALEX LEVITON

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

The Inner Critic.

The Inner Critic who?

The Inner Critic who wants to know: exactly who do you think you are? And, are you going to wear that to dinner?*

[READ MORE AFTER THE ARTICLE]

For the past two decades, I've been teaching and writing about how to balance your Inner Critic (and – more recently – its second cousin twice removed, Imposter Syndrome). I've met hundreds of your inner beastly behemoths, the three-headed Cerberuses of self-restraint, embarrassment, and cruelty that tells us we're somehow lesser than. Even the names you give them bring a smile to my writerly heart. I've met the Sludge Monster, Doctor Doom, California Barbie, The Bird, Shapeshifter, Wicked Witch, Fuckface, Professor Von Fancypants IV, and many delightfully, creatively named others.

“For my Inner Critic, improv was like the Boggart-banishing Riddikulus spell from Harry Potter...”

As a writer, my own Inner Critic has been shouting – loudly – in my ear since I was about 11 years old. In fact, I started taking improv classes back in 2001, specifically to quiet it. For my Inner Critic, improv was like the Boggart-banishing Riddikulus spell from Harry Potter:

“The charm that repels a boggart is simple, yet it requires force of mind. You see, the thing that really finishes a boggart is laughter.” – Professor Remus Lupin

Here are four rules of improv that help quell the Inner Critic, on stage, while writing, or in life:

1. **Play in the present moment**
2. **Mistakes can be opportunities**
3. **I failed!**
4. **Say yes (and)**

Play in the present moment

Besides meditation or rumination-stopping exercises, one of the only scientifically proven ways researchers have found that help us stay in the present moment is immediacy. Also known as, you know ... panic.

Improv's entire *raison d'être* is immediacy in the present moment. You're on stage or in front of your class, and someone hands you an apple, an ocelot, and a grenade. Is now the time to think about your dwindling retirement funds, or how lousy that meeting went?

No time! That ocelot is highly allergic to apples.

One of improv's greatest gifts is how ruminating thoughts go ‘Poof!’ when you're in that moment of immediacy. Look around you right now. Are you in any immediate danger? Do you still feel a nagging sense of foreboding doom about politics, our world, or your life? Thank the Inner Critic and its commitment to making sure you panic enough to stay safe. But thank improv for reminding you not to get stuck there.

Mistakes can be opportunities

Try telling your Inner Critic that.

Seriously. I mean literally. Say this to your Inner Critic right now:

“Hey, jerkface. That mistake you harangued me for last week? It was actually a growth opportunity, and I've already learned X.”

While the Inner Critic wakes you up at 2am to mull over that one time you laughed and accidentally drooled in



front of your entire 10th grade math class (or – cough, cough – so I hear), improv celebrates harmless ‘mistakes’. Called your scene-partner ‘brother’ Colin instead of Kevin? Welp, now Kevin’s got an evil twin named Colin. And maybe Colin builds and then destroys tiny villages for hamsters in his spare time.

“Trying to do all those tasks at once is a great recipe for perfectionist procrastination...”

In her seminal writing book *Bird by Bird*, author Anne Lamott recommends “shitty first drafts” to warm up your brain, exactly like an improv jam or class would.

“Too often storytellers put themselves under enormous pressure to be perfect right out of the gate,” says Amanda Castleman, founder of the online school Write Like a Honey Badger, where I teach creativity and the Inner Critic.

“So give yourself permission to blurt out a messy, sprawling story first. Then slow down and put on your analytical hat, figuring out what works and what doesn’t. But trying to do all those tasks at once is a great recipe for perfectionist procrastination and paralysis, which can lead to writer’s block!”

“I failed!”

Made a mistake in class? You know that moment in the split-second afterward, when the Inner Critic realizes you’re sliding, sliding, sliding into a rabbit hole of failure? Say the wrong thing, get flustered, or pause too long: your Inner Critic is twirling its evil moustache in

anticipation, waiting in the wings ready to jump in.

But, because the ‘failure bow’ (or ‘circus bow’) has been canonized as an improv rule, your brain knows ahead of time how to slam the judgment door in its gooey, Sludge Monster face. Instead of cowering or hiding in shame, “I failed!” you shout out proudly, taking the biggest, most theatrical, crowd-wowing ‘failure’ bow you can. Everyone cheers, and the Sludge Monster oozes back down to its swamp.

Say yes (and)

One of the grandfathers of improv, Keith Johnstone, sums up the improv wisdom of Yes, And... (as well as the benefits of a good, hearty No) well:

“There are people who prefer to say yes and there are people who prefer to say no. Those who say yes are rewarded by the adventures they have. Those who say no are rewarded by the safety they attain.”

Inner Critics keep us safe. Safe from danger, threat, and pain, both imagined or – yes – very, very real. And, although they don’t always do it in the kindest or most tactful way, they’re incredibly good at making sure you always do your best, or stay in good standing in your community.

So, ‘no’ can be a beautiful word. In fact, it’s so beautiful to your Inner Critic’s ears, they often prioritize it over your happiness.

Guess what offers you a safe alternative? (Go on, take a guess!)

That’s right: improv!

In the real world, saying yes to

“Want some of these fermented purple berries?” might get you killed. But in improv, saying “Yes, in fact, I will eat those berries! And, furthermore, I will also...” go on, take your pick: get super-human strength, or magical berry powers. Or maybe it transports you through time. Who knows? Who cares; it’s improv! You can do whatever you want!

Unfortunately, we don’t speak the same language as our brains’ defense systems, so we have no way of telling our brains modern life isn’t quite so dangerous. Saying ‘Yes, And...’ within the rules of improv teaches our 130,000-year-old Inner Critics that the dangers they think they’re protecting us from aren’t always as bad as they might think.

*The same scene as above, but while doing improv in a supportive environment:

Knock, knock.

... (no answer)

Knock, knock, knock, knock!

... (no answer)

Knock knock knock knock KNOCK KNOCK!

... (no answer; distant

sounds of laughter coming from the other room)



ALEX LEVITON

Alex Leviton is the director and founder of The Third Layer, a creative thinking consultancy with deep roots in Applied Improvisation. A long-time journalist, editorial director and writer, Alex’s interests in the process of creativity itself led her to AI. www.thethirdlayer.com

RESOURCE

Information becomes knowledge when it interconnects.
In this section we provide a guide to resources. A collection
can become more than an enumeration.



“Thanks so much! This is wonderful,
tracing back different conversations on the
same topic. What a great collection!”

Angelina Castellini, about an earlier version of my “Yes, And...” list

Resourcefulness

Words by
KAY ROSS

“Can someone point me to a book list on Applied Improvisation?”

“What do you say when a workshop participant says, ‘Yeah, but sometimes at work you have to say no?’”

Those are typical of the many questions about Applied

Improvisation that have been posted frequently on the AIN’s Facebook page or discussed

in our conferences and Open Space sessions.

I’m an Applied Improvisation facilitator and an improv performer, and since about 2008 I’ve serendipitously come across thousands of articles, quotable quotes, videos, podcast episodes, websites and books about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics.

Confessions of a hoarder

I’m also a freelance editor, and my career has included compiling listings of events, particularly in the performing and visual arts, for the “South China Morning Post” newspaper and the Hong Kong Festival Fringe organisation. So I’ve applied that skill to finding, assessing and collating material about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics, from many sources. I’ve cherry-picked what I think is the most relevant and useful material, and compiled ever-growing lists of resources on various topics.

And I love sharing the resources I find with people who I think will benefit from them. So to answer the

two questions at the beginning of this article, here are two of my lists for you:

- **My list of books about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics.** ↗ I’ve read lots of them, but not all of them. Yet.
- **My “Yes, And...” list.** ↗ What does this improv principle mean, and how applicable is it (or not) to life offstage? Opinions vary!



In them, you’ll find:

- evidence of the uses and effectiveness of Applied Improvisation (helpful for when you’re pitching to potential clients),
- advice, tips and suggestions about the history, theory, practice, business and ethics of Applied Improvisation,
- wisdom and tools from other relevant fields, such as management, coaching, psychology, education, facilitation, storytelling..., and
- ideas for workshop games, exercises and activities.

You’ll also be able to identify practitioners, academics and allied organisations around the world in

fields that interest you. So go ahead and contact them!

My resource-gathering philosophy

In my lists, I sometimes include short excerpts or my own comments, I include links wherever possible, and I feel an ethical responsibility to credit the source of the material.

Not all of the resources I gather are explicitly about Applied Improvisation. For example, I’ve seen articles about research by the “Harvard Business Review” and the World Economic Forum about the top skills that employees need. That’s useful information for us.

I don’t necessarily agree with everything the creators of the resources say, and that’s OK – as a former debater, I’m always curious to hear other people’s ideas. Also, I didn’t set out to gather every possible resource that’s available out there, but even so, I hope you find my lists useful.

In future issues I’ll share more of my lists, about such topics as failure, leadership, status and psychological safety.



KAY ROSS

Kay Ross is an Applied Improvisation facilitator, an improv performer and a marketing-minded freelance editor and copywriter. Her *The Playground of Possibilities* project offers a card deck and workshops that combine personal development and AI. She’s Australian and lives in Hong Kong. www.kayross.com www.playgroundofpossibilities.com

All in the Mindset - and the Body

Words by

PAUL Z JACKSON

It's always a pleasure to see books added to the growing shelf of Applied Improvisation (AI). My sense is that we're still in the early days of articulating and exploring the landscape of AI, and it will be a few years yet before the initials register as strongly as Artificial Intelligence or even Appreciative Inquiry – two of my other favourite AIs.

This is the second volume from Dudeck and McLure, who deserve medals as dedicated pioneers of this exciting AI terrain.

The collection's strongest strand is the descriptions of what the dozen or so authors did in their work with their clients. Kat Koppett and Theresa Burke, for example, give good accounts respectively of programmes that they devised, then developed over several iterations.

Other case studies deal with anxious teenagers, marginalised students, adults with dementia and workers in the humanitarian sector learning improvisational activities to make more successful impacts in meetings and conferences. It's a rich range of applications, and the stories are accompanied by clear step-by-step descriptions of activities that readers may wish to introduce in their own settings.

There's a game, for example, picked out by the editors at the start, which many of us know as 'You!', though McLure renames it here as 'Complexity'. The group works in a circle, going through increasingly intricate iterations of pointing sequences. In the debrief, the players discuss how they managed the potential overload of information, then consider how they might apply their learning in work settings.

"This is the second volume from Dudeck and McLure, who deserve medals as dedicated pioneers of this exciting AI terrain..."

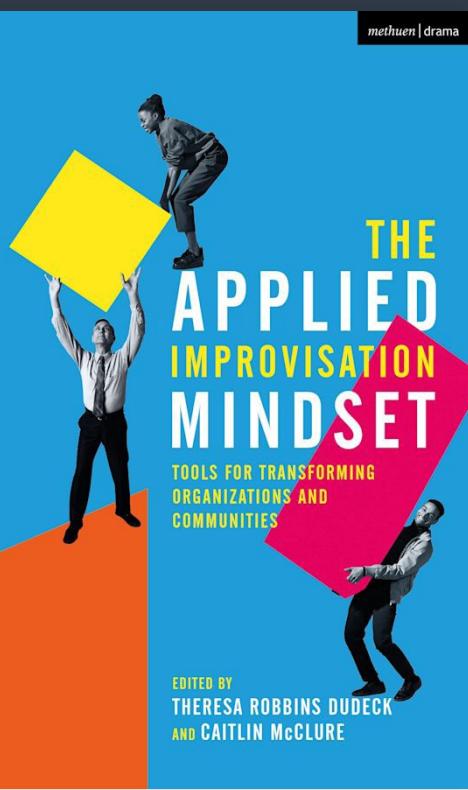
It's a great activity, but is it actually Applied Improvisation? Well, Yes and No (and maybe Yes Again). First 'Yes', because it's in the book and it's well-known in workshop settings.

Then 'No', because it's not theatre-based, which for the editors and publisher is the locus and source of AI. Lacking any audience/player distinction with attendant requirements or pressures to perform, or any role element (other than being oneself), it's no more theatre-related than another super activity suggested – drawing one line of a portrait of the person opposite, then moving along so that the next lines are contributed by successive neighbours.

A rigorous academic approach to AI will need to discuss meaningful distinctions between comparable but different or overlapping disciplines, such as experiential learning, dramatherapy, psychology and business studies, any of which might make equally welcoming 'homes' as the theatre department.

It's noticeable in the chapters how few of the activities are strictly (or even loosely) theatrical, though many of the authors favour the language of 'scenes' and 'performing'.

Indeed, if we start philosophically from the 'natural language' use of the word 'improvisation', then the topic suddenly escapes the confines of theatre and makes more appealing, intuitive sense. Something is improvisational because it presents a challenge which demands a novel response in the moment. The most useful skills for meeting those challenges are being ready, alert, flexible and in flow. For groups, we add elements of collaboration, co-creation, turn-taking and so forth. Koppett describes 'Improv as the gym' in her chapter title, which serves as a good metaphor as long as the improv is experienced only in workshop settings. When we're improvising in life, then improv is no longer the gym; improv is the thing itself.



While the practical work descriptions are often inspirational, some of the authors' forays into theories of learning and theories of change (including organisational change) are less impressive. We hear, for example, that a child learning to stand and walk 'fails and fails and fails'. To Gunter Losel's credit, he recognises that while this may be what's noticed by many improvisers (who are schooled in the minimal-consequence-for-mistakes environment of theatrical workshops), it's an unrepresentative 'counterculture'.

I checked this with a couple of mothers of toddlers who felt that their offspring were learning via a path of 'succeeding, succeeding and succeeding'. Quite! If it were not the case that the successes were outweighing the failures, how would these children be getting

TITLE
THE APPLIED IMPROVISATION MINDSET: TOOLS FOR TRANSFORMING ORGANIZATIONS AND COMMUNITIES
PUBLISHER
METHUEN DRAMA (AUGUST 12, 2021)
PAPERBACK
352 PAGES

any better each day at standing and walking? The parents found even applying a concept of 'failure' in such an important context of development was rather odd. The child was 'having a go', finding some things that worked, some that didn't, and kept reapplying the small improvements - of balance, limb control and positioning - to master the ultimate skill.

Going to the title of the book and considering how AI practitioners might want to present themselves in the academic and organisational realms, I wonder if 'mindset' is the best choice of metaphor for improvisers, who - you'd imagine - are not so concerned about what happens in the head (or the mind) as with what can be readily observed and transformed in the tangible and interactional world. Perhaps 'Stance' - or even 'Attitude' - would serve better, while still allowing for everything they want to say about improvisation.

'Mindset' feels rooted in the tradition of Cartesian dualism, with its fateful split of mind from body. 'Stance' is contrastingly adaptive, fungible, connected to the ground, with the possibility of movement. It's embodied, rather than hidden in the head, and allows for immediate and improvisational pivots. For anyone other than a psychologist, a mindset has to do the extra work

of manifesting itself in some way. In which case, the important part isn't this invisible 'mindset' but the observable behaviour - the 'offer' that the responding improviser can now work with.

Yes, this may be 'just' a question of linguistic and metaphorical preferences, but we are increasingly realising how much our language and our choices of framing carry significant consequences for understanding, teaching and practice.

If this book serves to bring more improvisational stances into the project of transforming organisations and communities, it is most heartily welcome.



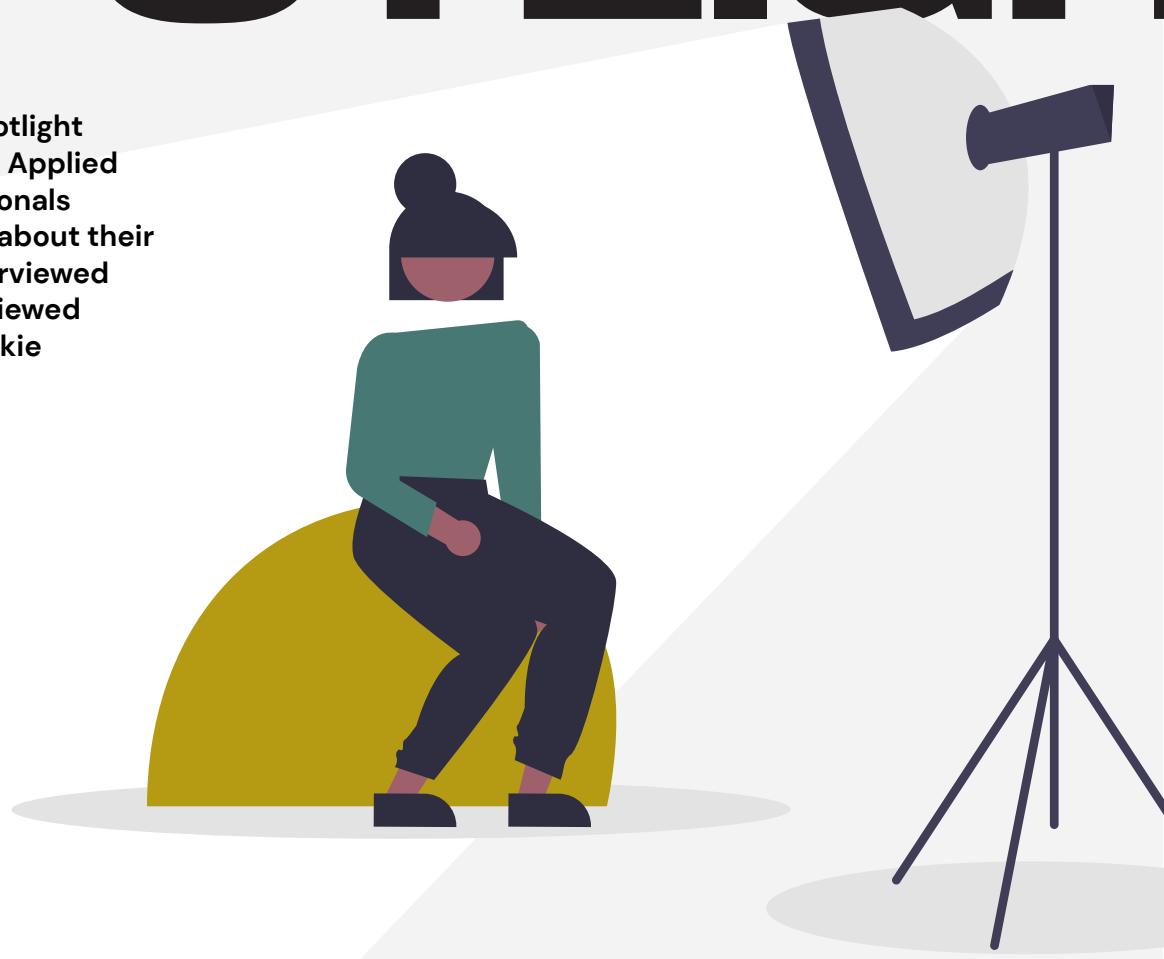
PAUL Z JACKSON

Paul Z Jackson is editor of the Applied Improvisation Magazine and author of books about improvisation, including *Impro Learning, 58½ Ways To Improvise In Training and Easy: Your LIFEPASS to Creativity and Confidence*. He is co-founder and a long-serving board member of the AIN.

Declaration of interest: I know the editors and many of the authors of this volume, and have been personally involved in some of the projects described in the book.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Here's the first AIM Spotlight column, in which three Applied Improvisation professionals interview one another about their work. Alex Leviton interviewed Bright Su; Bright interviewed Jackie Gnepp, and Jackie interviewed Alex.





Words by
ALEX LEVITON

Alex Leviton on Bright Su

"IMPROVISATION IS ZEN IN A WESTERN CONTEXT." — BRIGHT SU

Bright Su, the Applied Improvisation Magazine's Editor, has been both shaped by and shaping Applied Improvisation for over a decade. A supply chain professional and consultant based in San Jose, CA, Bright is also an improv teacher and the Chinese-language pioneering author of *Ji Xing Xi Ju* (Improvisational Theatre, 2020), the first complete book about improv ever written in Chinese. His book has been endorsed by leading improvisation practitioners, including at Second City and Stanford (where Bright was a teaching assistant for the renowned teacher Patricia Madson).

After moving from China to the US in 2001 and receiving his MBA from the University of Tennessee in 2002, Bright Su discovered improv in 2008. He began bringing it into the companies in which he worked, with great results. In 2015, he began teaching improv whenever he was back in China, and pivoted to online teaching in 2020 through his organization, Bright Improv.

Improvisation changed not only his personal and work life, but his spiritual, cultural and philosophical practices as well. While Applied Improvisation grew slowly over decades in the US out of theater and comedy, "In China, improv and AI have developed almost hand-in-hand," says Bright.

Bright envisions an exchange between Chinese culture and Western-style improv that would benefit both worlds,

such as more English-language tools used in Chinese AI, including debrief techniques and specialties (like medical Improvisation). At the same time, he'd also like to see Chinese traditional cultural practices incorporated into AI, such as mindful walking from Zen or breathwork from Taoism. For example, he incorporates rituals (one of Confucius' key teachings) in *The Mirror Game* by having participants bring their hands together and breathe in deeply three times in the beginning of the exercise, and bowing with a moment of silence to honor each other at the end.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BRIGHT SU

These practices are why "Improvisation is Zen in a Western context." (See also the full article in this issue). Bright says. "Listen and observe, be aware mindfully, be here and now." Bright also sees Improvisation as similar to Tao. In Improvisation our entire world is based on the principle of Yes, And... The correlate in the Tao, Bright says, is Yes = Yin (passive, acceptive, shadow, empathetic, feminine) and And = Yang (active, providing, shine, determinative, masculine).



Words by
BRIGHT SU

Bright Su on Jackie Gnepp

Jackie Gnepp is a consulting and coaching psychologist, improv performer, and Applied Improvisation practitioner. A recovering academic, she co-founded Humanly Possible® Inc. in 1999, took her first improv class in 2001, and discovered the AIN shortly after that. She has been using AI as an educational tool ever since, in management education programs, in leadership workshops and with executive coaching clients.

Jackie enjoys sharing her expertise in organizational change, decision-making, management psychology, and leadership with researchers, students, and executives worldwide. She has held visiting faculty positions in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia, working most recently in Türkiye.

A few of her favorite games to play with clients are *Bomb and Shield* and *Equilateral Triangles* to illustrate systems thinking and interdependence, *String of Pearls* to illustrate the function of middle management in moving a project from current state to envisioned future, and a complex version of *Ball Toss* to illustrate the consequences of change. “The value of any game,”

Jackie says, “is in its debrief, in knowing the questions to ask that will lead the participants to useful insights.” For example, following a round of *Bomb and Shield*, she might ask participants to discuss why, if everyone was following instructions, the task never resolved and what would fix that. “If they suggest it can be fixed through communication, we play again with talking allowed. When that doesn’t solve the problem, we discuss the nature of systems. Then I ask them for examples of important tasks at their jobs that can only be accomplished successfully if someone is willing to break the rules.”

Jackie is an alumna of the prestigious Second City Conservatory Program in Chicago. Her experience performing improv comedy has made her a more entertaining facilitator and presenter. “I make up funny examples, act out different characters, and interact playfully with the audience. When people laugh, they’re more comfortable participating, asking questions, and sharing things about themselves.” Workshop participants often express enthusiasm for applying what they’ve learned. “It’s immensely gratifying to get feedback like that.”

Jackie looks forward to AI becoming more professionalized, and would like to see it incorporated more into higher education, both as a teaching tool and to improve students’ interpersonal skills. One bit of advice Jackie would share with the next generation of AI practitioners is to be well versed in a content field such as business, science writing, organizational development, education, or health care, so they can provide more targeted AI interventions to clients.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JACKIE GNEPP



Words by
JACKIE GNEPP

Jackie Gnepp on Alex Leviton

Alex Leviton teaches, writes about, mentors, coaches, and speaks internationally about creativity and creative thinking. Rather than working as an Applied Improvisation practitioner, she uses the principles of AI in every moment of teaching writing, creativity and pre-creativity. “Pre-creativity,” according to Alex, is removing the tangible and intangible obstacles to creativity, most of which can be traced to a person’s internal dialogue. Fascinated by the intersection of creativity, physiology, the brain, and communication, Alex says that her three-layer creativity methodology (safety, bravery, aha!) pulls from a dozen disciplines. “In a way, I feel like the “aha!” layer is improv through a writing context,” says Alex.

Alex took her first improv class from BATS in San Francisco in about 2001, and then studied at The Second City in Chicago in 2014. She says, “Improv – more than school, writing, journalism grad school, anything – was the single most helpful thing for my writing.” Having also tried stand-up comedy, she reports, “Stand-up is a brutal punch to the gut; improv

is a warm hug that builds the gut muscles to withstand life’s punches.”

Over the years, Alex has created 90+ written exercises that all stack – layer by creativity-inducing layer – into a Creativity Notebook that she encourages clients to keep for the rest of their lives. For example, The Mathematics of Joy exercise is the first one Alex gives her creativity students, workshop participants – everyone who wants to be more creative. Instructions are: Start a list; write down 3-5 things that bring you joy; over the next day or week (or year or lifetime), continue to add things until you reach 100.

Journalist, editorial director, writer for Lonely Planet, and newspaper columnist, Alex is also the author of *Explore Every Day* (Lonely Planet, 2019), a book about incorporating the creativity of travel into our day-to-day lives. She thinks of her book as an act of rebellion against the forces that hold us back from exploring our creativity, our adventurousness and our communities. The book contains 365 (+1) exercises that Alex says are “Very Yes, And...,” such as attend a book reading no matter what it is, or find the closest body of water to you and have the 55-60% of you that’s

water say hi. “Like AI,” says Alex, “what I teach is about changing your perspective. And we all need prompts to do that.”

“As with about 98% of my life,” says Alex, “finding AIN was a total accident.” Attending her first online Open Space session, however, was sufficient to convince Alex that she had found her people. “Somehow,” she continues, “I accidentally started a ‘Higher Education’ group out of 2021’s online conference, and that amazing group accidentally started this magazine! Yes And, indeed!”



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEX LEVITON

Mathematics, Teaching, and Improvisation

An example of synergy for people who get annoyed by the word “synergy”.

Words by
DOUG SHAW

Note: I'm taking all the math(s) out of this story – if you are curious about the math(s), there is a slightly longer version of this article available [here](#): with the math presented gently for laypeople.

This is a story about a single moment. A moment where I forgot my Applied Improvisation (AI) knowledge, and remembered it before it was too late. A wonderful experience, continuing through today, that would not have happened had I not remembered. We all have our moments – forgetting our AI knowledge. Sometimes we remember in time, sometimes we don't. This is a story about one of mine when I remembered.

I was teaching an international summer program for math-enthused students. We had spent a delightful few days talking about Hamiltonian graphs, Tough graphs, and Eulerian graphs. Worry not what these terms mean, it isn't important to the story. I came to the climax of this part

of the course – I had the students get into groups and prove that IF a graph was Hamiltonian, then it was Tough.

HAMILTONIAN → TOUGH

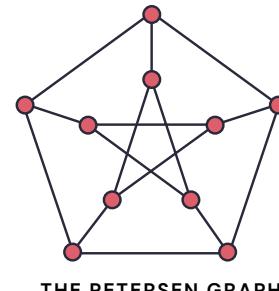
As we were summing up our discussion, and I was mentally rehearsing the introduction to our next topic, one student, Harris Spungen, asked if the converse of my statement was true – if every Tough graph was a Hamiltonian graph.

TOUGH → HAMILTONIAN

HARRIS'S FALSE CONJECTURE

“I cannot picture teaching Graph Theory without having a Harris Graph day. But what made it possible? Applied Improvisation...”

I had anticipated that question, and smoothly put this graph on the board:



THE Petersen GRAPH

We verified that the Petersen graph was Tough and that it was not Hamiltonian.

I was still on autopilot when Harris raised his hand, and told me he'd come up with a new conjecture:

TOUGH + EULERIAN → HAMILTONIAN

I knew his new conjecture had to be false, because if it were true, I



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG SHAW

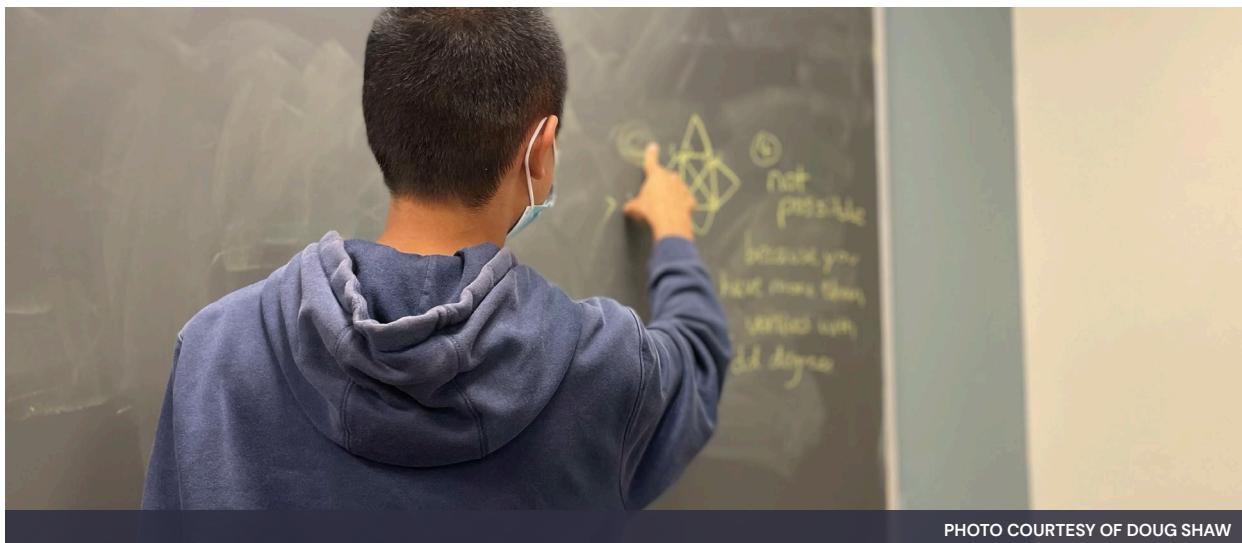


PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG SHAW

would have heard of it. I thought for minute, trying to come up with a quick counterexample. If you've ever taught, you know how long a minute is when you are standing at the board, thinking. I couldn't come up with one, so I said, "I'll get back to you on this tomorrow," and went back to my lecture plan.

After all, I'd been teaching for close to 30 years, and won teaching awards at four different universities, and I said, "I'll get back to you on this tomorrow," and went back to my lecture plan.

I'd been going around the country giving my successful *Improv for Educators* workshops and I said, "I'll get back to you on this tomorrow," and went back to my lecture plan.

I was teaching an ungraded course where I wanted the students to learn the thrill of mathematical discovery, and I said, "I'll get back to you on this tomorrow," and went back to my lecture plan.

Fortunately, I thought...
"Wait! What am I doing!"

And I said, "Hey - you know what? Nothing else I had planned for today is as interesting as Harris's conjecture. Let's try to find a counterexample."

"Uncertainty is okay. Chaos is okay. There's a joy in not knowing. Just like on stage..."

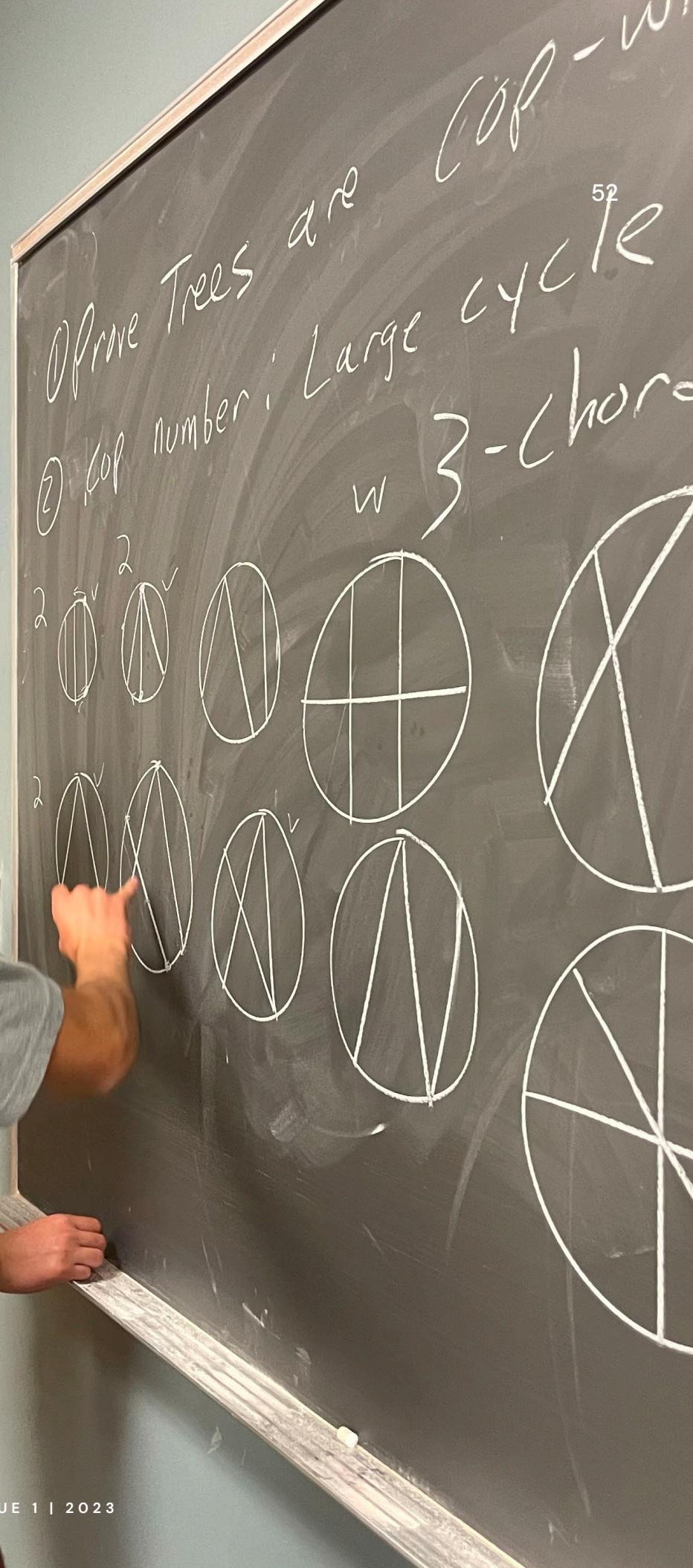
The extroverted students were at the chalkboard immediately, drawing and arguing. The more introverted ones had notebooks out, sketching and experimenting. Five minutes passed. Ten.

A few of the ones whose mathematical experiences all involved immediate success were getting frustrated and mentally checking out. And a couple of the ones who had confidence problems were also checking out.

When one group of three boys at the board called out, "I think we got it!", I was in full-on Applied-Improvisation mode, and made myself look busy and distracted.

I asked the checked-out students for a favor - "Can you see if they are right?" And they were all too happy to be useful, running up to the picture, to see if it was a counterexample. It wasn't - they showed it wasn't. But by then someone else had a proposed counterexample, and off they went - the Harris Graph Verification Squad.

Twenty minutes passed. Twenty-five. When the HGV Squad were convinced that a counterexample worked, a teaching assistant and I would take a look, dashing hopes to the ground. Had Harris come up with a new condition after all? Nobody knew, not even me. And that is another lesson from Applied Improvisation in education. Uncertainty is okay. Chaos is okay. There's a joy in not knowing. Just like on stage, when neither the audience nor the actors know how our heroes will escape from the cave guarded by bears. The teacher didn't know if Harris was right, the students didn't know if Harris was right, and Harris was having the time of his life trying to prove himself wrong.



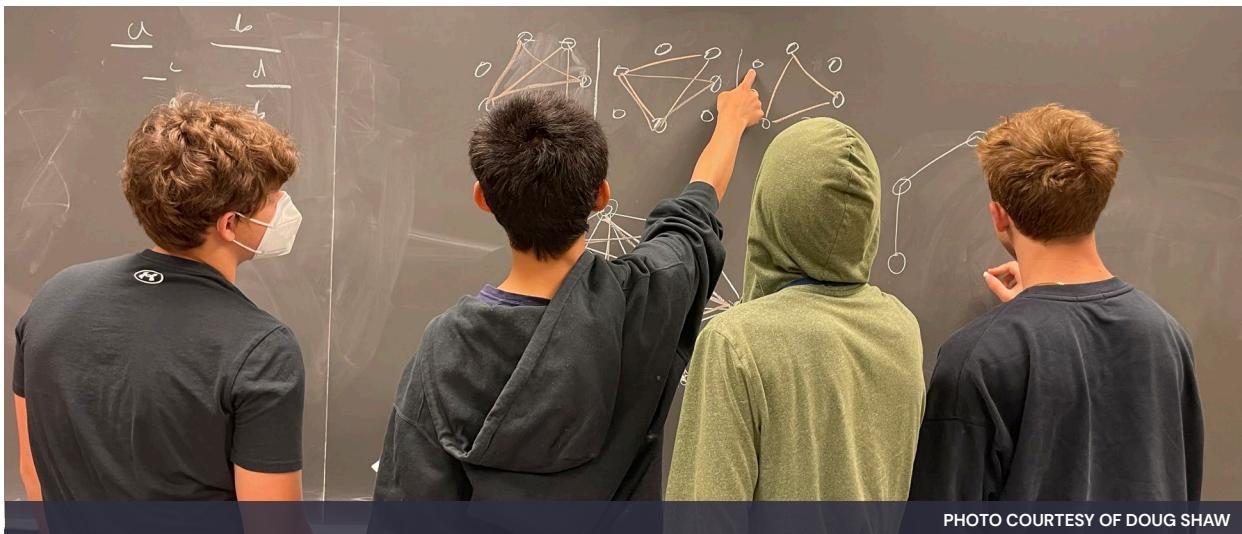


PHOTO COURTESY OF DOUG SHAW

Thirty minutes. Ask a teacher friend how often you get a class of students completely involved in an activity for 30 minutes. Laughing, yelling, groups splitting and reforming. All looking for this holy grail, which I found myself calling a Harris Graph. While the HGV Squad ran from group to group, and the TAs were called in when they couldn't break a potential graph, I was hanging back, because pedagogically I had decided – no, that is a lie – because I wanted to find a Harris graph, too. When working alone wasn't doing it, I joined a group as an equal. Applied Improvisation lesson: Think about status. Think about status reversals.

Finally, after about 45 minutes, one graph passed the HGV Squad's inspection, the TAs' inspection, and my inspection. So I asked the entire class to help confirm. All 23 people in the room gathered around, students, teaching assistants, myself. Painstakingly checking Toughness, looking for Hamiltonicity by tracing cycles in the air with our fingers.

I said to the class, "This graph is called a Harris Graph. We have proven they exist."

Every summer that I teach Graph Theory, I relate the tale of Harris,

and we look for Harris graphs. Some groups find one, some don't find any, some find several. One motivated student created and now curates a Harris Graph Zoo on the internet. Students are eager to come up with new Harris Graphs, knowing they will get their discoveries in the Zoo.

So much has come from that day! I've published a paper about Harris Graphs, a student wrote code to check if a graph is a Harris graph, a later student created a nice interface for it, and a later student used that code to find all the Harris graphs of "order 10" or fewer. Another student asked me to mentor him on a Harris Graph research project, which helped him get into the university of his choice. Students have emailed me, asking me to help them understand mathematics papers as they independently researched the subject... all because I admitted I didn't know the answer to a question.

Harris graphs have inspired students to embrace their love of mathematics, to sometimes add the subject as a major or minor in college. Over 500 students have looked for Harris graphs. I cannot picture teaching Graph Theory without having a Harris Graph

day. But what made it possible? Applied Improvisation.

Let's go back to the basic concepts that come up when we teach AI. Listening. Yes, And-ing. Status. Inclusivity. Honesty and vulnerability. Persistence. Spontaneity. Think of your individual pet concept – that AI concept that you *always* include in every workshop you do – and think about how it was in the soup above. Mathematics is a large subject, Mathematics Education is a large subject, and this tale was an example of how Applied Improvisation can transform both of them.



DOUG SHAW

Doug Shaw is a mathematics professor who has won many awards for his teaching. His *OK Zoomer* workshop has been presented to over 10,000 instructors in over 12 countries. His *Improv for Educators* workshop has been helping educators throughout the United States. His favorite workshop to give is *Collaborative Creativity*, where the audience winds up writing, drawing, and telling stories together.

A Scientist, a Project Manager and an Improviser Walk into a Zoo

Words by
LISA YEAGER

According to the Yale Center for Climate Communications (“Global Warming’s Six Americas,” n.d.), two thirds of Americans are worried about global warming, but only half of them discuss it, even occasionally. And I get it! Even though I have the opportunity to talk about it as a volunteer informal educator at my local zoo, I am hard-pressed to do it myself. Here’s the story of how I teamed up with other Applied Improvisors to help more people get comfortable talking about climate.

The challenge

When I started my second master’s degree in biology at Miami University’s acclaimed **Project Dragonfly Program**, I was immediately drawn in by what informal learning settings could offer. Much of what I read from social and climate scientists such as the Nature Conservancy’s Chief Scientist Katharine Hayhoe was about the importance of talking about climate change.

I realized that zoos, museums and aquariums - places where I’d hang out and volunteer - were prime venues for drawing the public into conversations about climate change and could serve as a resource for civic and environmental engagement.

I had a new toolkit of ideas and techniques from the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation - (NNOCCI | Climate Interpreter, n.d.) and The Frameworks Institute (Framing for

Climate Interpreters, n.d.). And the first time I tried them out on zoo guests, one lady stood in front of me, red-faced, hands on hips, and proclaimed, “I don’t believe in that theory.” I was stuck. As an improviser, all I could think was, “How am I gonna ‘Yes, And...’ this lady?”

And so I tested my ideas with other docents at the zoo, people who had many more years of experience in guest interaction than I did. We tried effective metaphors for explaining the basics of climate-change science (NNOCCI | Climate Interpreter, n.d.). People more readily understand the concept of a ‘heat trapping blanket,’ than ‘greenhouse,’ for example. I also started weaving information about climate-change science, impacts and solutions into new training content for docents, and developed a toolkit of best practices from leading organizations in the field such as the NNOCCI and The Cleo Institute (The CLEO Institute

– It’s Time For A Climate Change of Mind, n.d.).

“People more readily understand the concept of a ‘heat trapping blanket,’ than ‘greenhouse’...”

The missing piece

The emerging best practices spoke to the importance of connecting conversationally with the public. Organizations such as The Nature Conservancy (Can We Talk Climate?, n.d.), Audubon Society (Climate Action Guide, n.d.), and academic journals (“Aquariums and Zoos Gear Up to Teach Climate Change,” 2017) (Clayton et al., 2014) (Geiger et al., 2017) suggested finding common shared values, and listening to understand, more than talking and pushing information at people.

Yet I fear that information alone doesn’t move the needle. If the sheer



PHOTO COURTESY OF LISA YEAGER



facts about climate change were enough to motivate individual and societal change, we'd have it sorted by now.

People place more trust in conversations they have with people they know - friends, neighbors, that nice docent at the zoo or museum - than they do in distant 'experts' they hear on the news. The docents I knew were already doing much that was working, but we needed tools to build stronger connections and common goals.

The Applied Improvisors reading this may have reached the same conclusion as I did: that climate-change conversations are ripe territory for our kind of work. I started by introducing 'Yes, And...' to the docents with whom I was partnering. I could see sparks catch fire as many of them quickly realized they could use this concept to help make ALL of their conversations more impactful. The basics were coming together, but I knew things would be even better if I had some help.

The team

Two colleagues I met at Applied Improvisation Network conferences offered just the right mix of facilitation and conservation know-how:

Bobbi Block and I first crossed paths at the Montreal conference and our interactions grew organically over time through the AIN Facebook group. She's a seasoned improviser, theater professional and trainer, with more than twenty years of experience helping people with leadership, team-building and behavior-change initiatives. When I invited others from the AIN Facebook group to join me in a climate-change speakers' training I was attending, she jumped at the chance; she told me she was eager to learn more about climate change because she felt a bit uninformed, and wanted to strengthen her knowledge. After taking the course, Bobbi was confident we could use improvisation to help others communicate about climate change.

Karen Strong sat down beside me at the Stonybrook conference, took one look at my name tag, and yelled, "I'm supposed to talk to you - you're using improvisation in conservation!" Word gets around in the AIN community! Karen told me she came to AIN specifically to improve communication in conservation. She was trained as a biologist and, with a twenty-year career as a conservation professional, came to accept that science doesn't conserve nature, people do. Karen now consults with organizations that conserve land, wildlife and water, building on her background and expertise in science, conservation and nonprofit organizational development. She started developing improvisation communication workshops for conservation professionals in 2020, and when we reconnected at the





PHOTO COURTESY OF LISA YEAGER

AIN's Friday Open Space, we started working on projects together.

We were eager to collaborate, and as we followed up on conversations begun during the 2019 conference, opportunities fell into place. The three of us like to joke that we represent what happens "when a scientist, a project manager, and an improviser walk into a bar." We started exploring ways of using improvisation activities to help make the scary, overwhelming concept of climate change more accessible and even enjoyable.

Our first project was titled "Climate Change for Improvisers," which we presented at the 2021 AIN virtual conference. Because the session was targeted to an audience of improvisers, we were not surprised that the AINers loved the exercises. We then considered how to work with non-improvisers. Lisa and Bobbi experimented in opportunities with Woodland Park Zoo and Seattle Aquarium beach naturalists.

The solution

I came to appreciate that a key component to talking about climate change is not talking at all, but listening. So in our programs, we combine improvisation-based

exercises with data on the causes of climate change, solutions, and social behavior to develop communication skills designed to tackle this daunting topic. For example, when a zoo guest asks if climate change is real, a docent can ask the guest if they have noticed any changes in their own climate. Based on their answers, we can either 'yes, and...' by sharing similar observations we've noticed, or making a link to shared values, such as what these changes might mean for our kids.

"We started exploring ways of using improvisation activities to help..."

In our sessions with improvisers, as well as those with informal educators, we mixed tested techniques with some that were newly emerging from the 2021 conference. Some examples include:

- *I am a Tree* - In the classic form of this game, players build a tableau together by using their bodies to create a sculpture of interrelated elements – for example, a tree, a squirrel and a nut. In our adaptation for use in teaching climate concepts, we had players create two tableaux. The first represented a cause of climate change while the second identified a solution.

- *Thank You, Because* – We built this activity on the emerging research and practice presented at the 2021 AIN conference plenary by Kelly Leonard. Traceable back to Augusto Boal and a variation on a 'Yes, And...' activity, *Thank You Because* helps pairs of participants to develop deeper empathy and stronger listening skills. Participants pair up to discuss strongly-held opposing viewpoints. The response to their partner must begin with "Thank you, because..." So for example, if my partner said, "Cats are better pets than dogs because they are so independent," I might respond, "Thank you, because before I had a cat, I thought the independence was aloofness, but you're reminding me that that's not necessarily the case."

- *Sales Pitch* - In a brief round with the whole group, participants improvised an off-the-cuff advertisement or public service announcement featuring a random object provided by another participant. "Climate change got you down? Well, this jam jar is the answer, and here's why.....!" By liberating themselves from having to think deeply or at length about solutions, they were able to allow the learning and reflections from the session to combine with their lived experience to promote co-creation, fun, and engagement.

The way ahead

So far, the Project Manager, the Scientist and the Improvisor have delivered this program to 75+ zoo volunteers; have delivered variations of these sessions to 90 beach naturalists from the Seattle Aquarium; offered workshops as part of the [Applied Improvisation Network and Conservation](#)

Marketing Conferences in 2021; and created a session for alumni of a **Making Moves Behavior Change for Conservation** course pioneered by behavior-change marketing specialist Brooke Tully. Lisa received additional support and funding when she was awarded a Cee-Change Fellowship from the North American Association of Environmental Education (**NAAEE**). Its Environmental Protection Agency partners were particularly intrigued by the innovation that uses the arts to support civic engagement and environmental education.

Building on these successes, we are launching a five-week series for conservation communicators in 2023.

Participants in these sessions will gain:

- Understandable, accessible facts: We intend to break through the overwhelming array of science facts and misinformation to a set of trusted resources about the basics of climate science and the impacts climate change is having now.

- Collaboration and confidence: Participants will learn techniques for building collaborative conversation skills that are based on shared values and listening.
- Relevant solutions: Participants will learn how to re-frame their individual solutions into civic-focused, hopeful constructs.

Climate Conversations

Climate Conversations is an initiative that has been brought to life by a group of dedicated volunteers. We don't feel ready, and we don't feel like we know quite what we're doing, but we DO know that we need to do something to address the issue of climate change. So we are learning and building our part of the movement together.

Join us at Climate Conversations - because we can't fix what we don't talk about. When we can relax, have some fun learning, and practice together, we're more likely to talk about the most pressing issue of our time.



MORE READING/RESOURCES

Are you interested in learning more about Climate Change from the resources we used to create our programs? Check out these books and websites:

- Saving Us** - This book by the Chief Scientist for The Nature Conservancy underscores the value and importance of talking about climate change with our friends and neighbors, as well as our policy-makers (Hayhoe, 2021).
- The National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation** - Through courses and instructional materials, NNOCCI supports interpreters at informal learning institutions such as zoos, museums, and aquariums with research-backed communication tools and methods (National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation - NNOCCI | Climate Interpreter, n.d.).
- The CLEO Institute** - This presidential-award-winning organization is a leader in climate-change activism in Florida, and offers training for speakers. Two of us attended the certification training that formed the backbone of some of our climate change content (The CLEO Institute – It's Time For A Climate Change of Mind, n.d.).
- The Yale Program on Climate Change Communications** - By conducting comprehensive research on public knowledge, attitudes, preferences, and behavior, this center provides a wealth of data, visualization, and resources for anyone interested in climate-change engagement and communication ("Global Warming's Six Americas," n.d.).

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LISA YEAGER

After volunteering at Woodland Park Zoo for more than eight years, Lisa enrolled in a second master's degree in biology through an innovative program from Miami University offered in partnership with zoos and botanical gardens across the US. All her projects ultimately focus on ways to mobilize and engage new and different audiences in climate-change action. Her background in project management proved useful for both bringing in and managing new collaborators in these efforts.

Lisa has been a member of the Applied Improvisation Network for more than seven years, and has served on the board of the organization.

Improvisation is Zen in Western Context

Words by

BRIGHT SU

One lunch time in the late 1980s, I came home from middle school and found my dear Grandma sitting in the corner, sorting some long green beans. She smiled as I waited to eat.

“The experience can awaken our innate joy, freedom, self-expression and courage...”

She was focusing attentively on the beans. With a soft glance of full attention, she held one long string, touching each particle of bean inside to measure the same 2-inch lengths, before cutting that piece using only her fingers.

She was patiently slow. “Why don’t you use the knife? Chop, chop, chop!” I said.

I wanted fast... efficient... alpha. I just didn’t understand, until we fast forward 20 years later, when I start to take meditation training and improv workshops. I realize Grandma was being in the moment: the way of doing was her way of being.

Improvisation is Zen in a western context. Listen and observe; be aware mindfully; be here and now, whether you are in the living room, on the stage, in the office, with a crying child, or walking in the park.

Which is not to say it’s easy. It is a lifetime practice.

One of the beauties of improvisation for me is that we almost always do it with others, with fellow stage improvisers or Applied Improvisation practitioners in our lovely AIN community.

The Bhagavad Gita Hindu scripture says, “Yoga is the journey of the self through the self to the self”. Improvisation is the journey of the self through the others to the self.

Many people learn improv first through games designed to be interactive, engaging, challenging and interesting. The experience can awaken our innate joy, freedom, self-expression and courage. From theater games, improvisation takes us on a journey from “interesting form” to arrive at the deep formless. The latter is love and wisdom. With improvisation, we seek to operate fully in the moment - even automatically - at our best when in service to others.

Improvisation is a yin art form, that is to say feminine, maternal, tender, and sensual. Indeed, I meet many people in the improvisation circle who are caring and kind, with soft hearts.

My Grandma never answered my question verbally. But she did answer by her way of doing - and with no formal meditation or improvisation training.

That day, mindful of the beans, she was as ever taking a calming

break from her earlier housework. Parasympathetic regulation, if you like.

After lunch I took a nap. When I woke up, she was still with the beans and said, “Now that you’ve rested, go to school steadily and slowly.” She gave me a light touch and said, “I’ll take a nap now.” Grandma had made sure I woke up on time, keeping her eyes on me in her silent service. Yes, and she integrated such things into her everyday life. My Grandma is my mindfulness and improvisation hero.



JI XING XI JU
(IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE)



BRIGHT SU

Bright grew up in China, has lived in the US since 2001, and began studying improvisation in 2008. He is the author of “*Ji Xing Xi Ju*” (*Improvisational Theatre*), a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation, published in 2020. He serves as an editor for the *Applied Improvisation Magazine*. www.brightimprov.com



We Will Be Calling It Improvisation

Words by

PAUL Z JACKSON | [BIO LINK](#)

We had a productive session in Spain on 'The future of Applied Improvisation'. Paul Z Jackson made these notes, which convey the main points and perhaps the flavour of the event.

The big question facing us: 'What is the future of Applied Improvisation?'

A group of us at the AIN in SpAIN conference agreed upon a few propositions.

It is 'Improvisation'

We'll call it Improvisation - without apology. Improvisation is a phenomenon in its own right, observable in many fields of practice, and part of everyone's experience. So we can choose to approach it from how it shows up in everyday life, and explore it in its different manifestations. That's in contrast to seeing it (as some have traditionally)

as a specialist set of skills known only to an artistic elite who might graciously explain it and share it with the rest of us.

There is a diverse range of practitioners

Everyone experiences improvisation in their lives, and it is highlighted as part of the practice of many disciplines and professions. For example, theatre improv performers have made it famous, especially with the international TV success of *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. Jazz musicians have been long studied and admired. As dancers or spectators we enjoy improvised traditions of tango and flamenco.

And beyond the art, we see improvisation deep in organisations, practiced by coaches, therapists, facilitators and sports players. Wherever there's playfulness, in games or the everyday lives of children, there's improvisation.

It's possible for the community of improvisers to agree a family of principles or descriptions of improvisation

All would agree that a set of tenets will be attractive, useful and perhaps even desperately needed for various reasons – including human growth and well-being. They represent better responses to personal, organisational and social circumstances.

Which tenets are included in our definitions or descriptions of 'Improvisation'?

We offered a provisional list:

- Honouring the initial impulse – recognising the place of spontaneity
- Comfort with ambiguity
- Recognition of complexity and emergence





- Acceptance of (life's) offers
- Yes, And...

Improvisation is context sensitive

How improvisation is recognised, described or recommended will vary from context to context.

This *Three Wave* framework usefully accounts for three of the main perspectives which practitioners currently offer:

Wave 1

Theatre class – in which people learn various skills to be better equipped to perform improvised shows on stage (or TV etc), in front of an audience. This wave extends to offering an improv show as corporate entertainment.

Wave 2

Improvisation as a route to various professional and life skills, learned

in workshops and courses, often without 'improvisation' in the title.

Operating in this wave, the practitioner is well aware that 'all the world's a stage' is a metaphor and is able to teach improvisation without theatre. They don't depend on the theatrical basics of separating performer from audience, or requiring participants to play any role (other than themselves). In this wave we see a wider variety of activities and debriefs and other methods to upskill participants' confidence, teamwork, creativity, writing, leadership, medical practice, humanitarian rebuilding of damaged communities, communication of scientific knowledge, etc, etc... This wave depends notably on good facilitation, trainer and design skills.

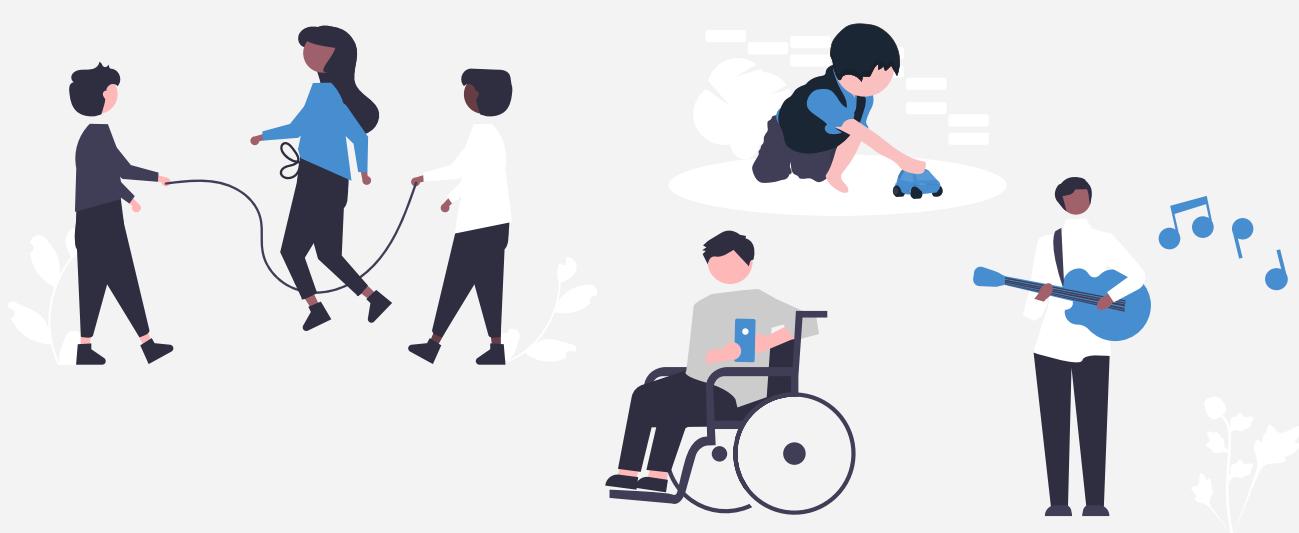
Wave 3

Improvisation 'Without the games'. This is the realm of do-it-yourself improvisation, so it's a bit tougher

to describe and discover. Good examples include *The Quest*, *Street Wisdom* and everyday life improvisation.

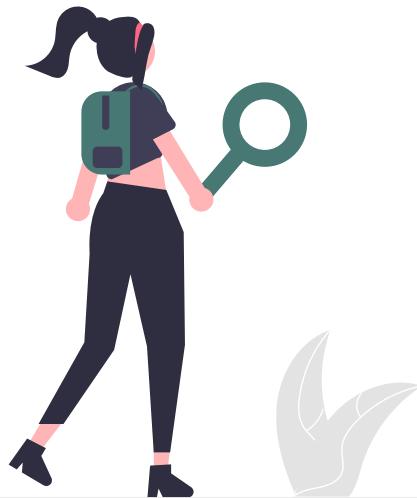
“Everyone experiences improvisation in their lives, and it is highlighted as part of the practice of many disciplines and professions...”

In this guise, people are improvising (consciously), without the need for a workshop or training programme or expert improvisational facilitators. They learn through the experience of improvising, prompted by books, worksheets, games, apps and other inventive formats. If you ask them to describe their experience, instead of talking about performance formats or particular exercises, they'll go to the heart of the matter - the nature of presence, flow, collaboration, creativity and spontaneity.



RESE BRIEF

Let's get academic. Here we explore what researchers have to say about Applied Improvisation. Lukas Zenk describes his current project.



ARCH ES



Essential Skills in Dynamic Environments

Words by
LUKAS ZENK

What is the fundamental difference between classical and improvised theater? At first glance, the question seems trivial. In classical theater, all scenes, actions, costumes, stage props, lighting, etc. are planned in advance and then executed. And in improvised theater they are... not planned. This leads to an interesting question: If all these resources of planning and preparation are missing, what other resources are needed to perform an improvised theater piece?

“We call on improvised action either to develop something new outside a routine, or to act other than planned due to unexpected events...”

We can distinguish fundamentally between planned and improvised human action. Planned actions are developed and sometimes even practiced in advance. These performed actions remain basically the same and can be repeated on demand - a routine is established. We call on improvised action either to develop something new outside a routine, or to act other than planned due to unexpected events. Thus, improvisation in current common usage means developing something new in the here and now.

So, what resources do we need to improvise in theater? Basically, it requires, in addition to acting techniques and rehearsal time,

special skills for collaboratively developing something new in real time. In improvisational theater, a variety of methods, techniques, and mindsets such as Yes, And-ing are trained for this purpose, to utilize the full potential offered in the moment. However, these skills are not limited to the domain of theater: they are essential in the context of dynamic environments in general. Contemporary entrepreneurs, for example, rarely develop classic business models in which they strictly follow a detailed long-term plan. Instead, they iteratively develop their business models and take advantage of short-term opportunities.

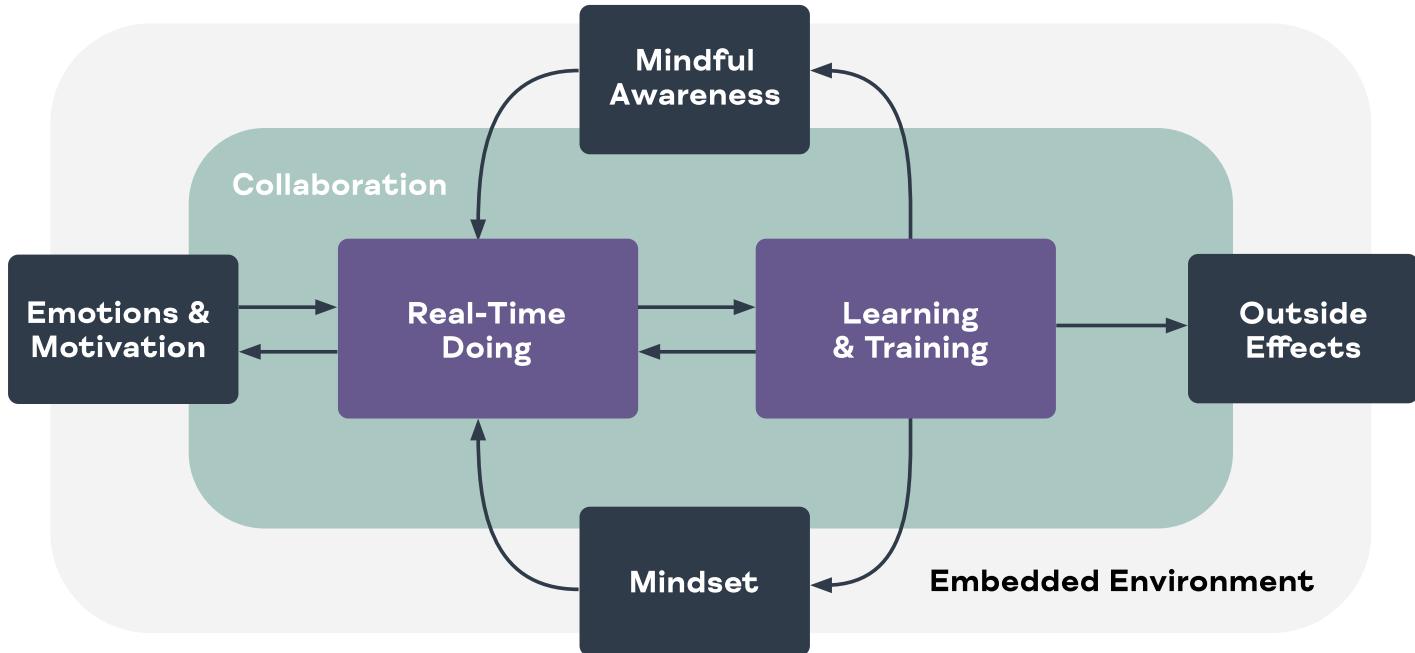
Established organizations also increasingly face the challenge of adapting to more dynamic environments. In fact, there are myriad circumstances in which it is advantageous to not stick to an outdated plan but to remain capable of acting in real time, whether it's project management, social work or (medical) emergencies.

To investigate these fundamental improvised actions, we interviewed a wide range of experts from the arts, management, and science in a research project on Organizational Improvisation. The goal was to find out what essential skills people need when they improvise. The result was a first system model that demonstrates (similar to creativity), that improvisation is about not one single skill, but an ensemble of interacting factors.

The most important factor is the ability to act effectively in real

“The methods and techniques of Applied Improvisation are particularly effective in building our capacity to operate off the beaten track. This does not mean we completely abandon planning...”





whether developing our ability to act appropriately on the theater stage or in a business project. The training develops a mindful awareness to recognize and utilize the resources currently available in the moment. Improvisers also become open to new ways of approaching challenges and dealing with setbacks. Although one can improvise alone, most experts stated that they collaborated to solve unexpected problems on the fly. A supportive environment in an organization can positively influence these improvisational episodes.

In short, the study reveals that improvisation is a complex phenomenon, with skills that can be learned. In a rapidly-changing world and with the emergence of polycrises, we need such meta-

competences to remain capable of taking worthwhile action. The methods and techniques of Applied Improvisation are particularly effective in building our capacity to operate off the beaten track. This does not mean we completely abandon planning: It is about recognizing when it makes sense to plan and when we need to improvise. Only then can we expect to stay calm and present as we handle challenging, complex, and dynamic situations - on stage or in a business meeting.



LUKAS ZENK

Lukas Zenk is an Associate Professor of Innovation and Network Research at the Department for Knowledge and Communication Management at the Danube University Krems, Austria. In his applied research projects, he investigates how people collaboratively solve complex problems and how creative and innovative processes can be supported. www.improvisation.science

LET'S DO THIS AGAIN SOON!

Please let us know what you think. Use [THIS LINK](#) to give us feedback on this issue. It will take only a few minutes.

You may be wondering where this magazine came from. Well, it emerged from discussions within the AIN Higher Education group, back in late 2021.

The group was intrigued to discover what the combined talents within AIN could produce. We asked for magazine writers and volunteers on AIN's Facebook page, on our LinkedIn groups and during the SpAIN conference and AIN's Open Space sessions.

We heard great enthusiasm for the project, with everyone foreseeing clear benefits for AIN (the network) and for the practice of Applied Improvisation (the field).

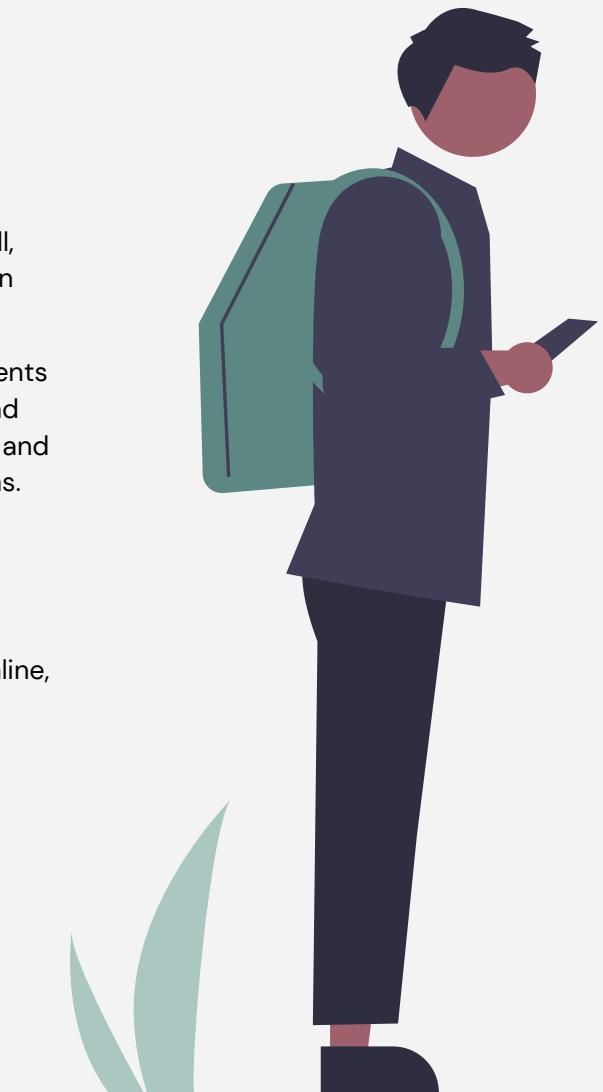
We plan to continue publication of future issues, starting online, with the solution for print on demand.

If you'd like to help with production, layout, editing, writing or marketing, please let us know at appliedimprovisationmagazine@gmail.com.

You'll be most welcome to join us.

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January 2023



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