EASY

Your LIFEPASS to creativity and confidence

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Published by The Solutions Focus: London, UK, 2015

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It's only natural

Is your life easy? Would you want it to be? Mine is not always as easy as I would wish.

Browsing the web, eating chocolate and hanging out with friends in pubs are already easy, and I don't need to make them any easier. I'm particularly keen to find more ease in difficult tasks like negotiating agreements with a group of colleagues or keeping my attention on a complex document.

Without expecting it ever to be without elements of challenge, struggle, pain and even hardship, I relish the moments when productive life is easy. I enjoy that feeling of flow when things go well, feeling fully present and absorbed in the moment. I am confident, creative and resourceful - willing to say 'Yes' to adventure and possibility.

And as it happens, these are the characteristics of improvisation. Something that is often perceived as scary and difficult turns out to be the key to making life easy.

You improvise every day. Life for the most part is not scripted. And since you are reading this book, you must have cultivated enough improvisation skill to make it up to this point. One of the aims of Easy is to highlight how you have managed to do so and how you can benefit from that skill even more.

When we recognise improvisational moments, we are better placed to see possibilities. We can make new choices. If you want to make a difference, to take your own heartfelt path through life, you have to accept risks; you must engage with the world, with all its shifting, fascinating interactions.

How the book works

This book describes the concepts that make up the world of everyday improvisation. It offers you a vocabulary, a framework in which to build up your skills, develop your confidence and creativity and see better results. And because it is surprisingly and refreshingly easy, there is likely to be a lot of fun along the way.

In fact, it could become your approach to life, a way of being in the world that helps you get more of the results you want through open, honest and authentic processes.

Your personal academy

So welcome to your personal Improvisation Academy. Oh, and you are also getting more than a book: there's further written text and multi-media resources only a click away. I hope you'll find it informative, enjoyable and - above all - useful.

You're interested? Good. So access our free audio 'Right Here, Right Now' straightaway for a taste of Easy.

The other free bonus materials, including a handbook of '21 Games To Make Life Easy' for trainers, facilitators and workshop leaders, are accessed from the final chapter of Easy.

In the course of this book you will learn:

> *How to make things easy - mostly by using techniques from improvisation*
> *How to access and make more of your own creativity by uncovering it, developing it and using it in new and interesting ways*
> *How to present yourself and your ideas with more confidence*

Let's assume that you already possess a degree of confidence in some of your daily activities. And let's also assume that

there have been times you felt reasonably creative, even if they were in the distant past.

In fact, we can proceed on the assumption that your current levels of creativity and confidence are a good basis for the work proposed here.

It is the nature of improvisation to work with whatever is there; *bricolage*, as the French call it. Let's accept that as the starting point. We are not concerned with what you don't have or what isn't there, because plainly that cannot be used.

So we shall not be delving into 'gaps' or analysing your 'weaknesses'. Instead we'll proceed by small steps and intriguing micro-adventures to grow your capabilities.

The book contains descriptions of many games and activities. They'll put you through your paces verbally, physically, artistically and mathematically. Knowledge that arises from improvisation is experiential: each activity will reveal and develop your skills of focused attention, creativity, collaboration and resilience.

The activities in this book are meant to be enjoyable in themselves, while also serving as prompts for personal reflection. Some are powerful metaphors for other aspects of our lives. They all teach skills. So if you follow the logic and join in with the activities, you'll be rewarded with an interactive, discursive and reflective mix of experiences.

As my colleague Dan Weinstein puts it, 'What happens in improvisation need not stay in improvisation; in other words, ideas that arise in improvisational moments may be end products in themselves, but they may also find their way, directly or indirectly, into other projects'. [personal communication, 2015]

You'll see a range of applications of improvisation described in Easy.

A friend of mine, for example, had a terrible relationship with her boss, who would allocate work with too little explanation, then critique the results with a red pen. It seemed frustrating, pointless and unlikely to change. From an improvisation class, she took the idea of raising her status closer to that of her boss, and politely requested a chat about how her work was given and received. The boss readily agreed, saying that he was open to offering more explanation and less criticism – whatever got the job done better was, after all, in both of their interests.

One of my clients wanted fresh ideas to revive their enormous range of paper products. So we invited the team into an inspiring glass-walled room in an aquarium, prompted them into a creative mood with a set of improvisation activities and then gathered hundreds of written and drawn ideas for product innovations.

Still, there's a limit to acquiring wisdom from books. There's value beyond reading, in interacting with other people. In collaboration you open up more possibilities of having fun and learning from colleagues. That sort of learning cannot be delivered to you in nuggets of wisdom - it's created between us.

That means you will reap more from this experience by making opportunities for yourself to participate in the activities described along the route. Some, such as the visualisations, can be done by yourself. Most are much easier with a group of people; then you have others to play with, bounce ideas off and compare notes.

When you improvise, you can expect to enjoy an array of emotions - fun, laughter and surprise - for example. You may also experience fear and nerves. That makes sense because improvisation takes you into the unknown. You'll be doing things that you didn't know you were going to do, responding in the moment to the unexpected.

We'll often prefer the safety of not having to do that. We might even relish having everything going to plan and completely as prepared. But life isn't always like that. So it is useful to be comfortable with uncertainty and have the skills to respond and adapt to whatever is happening around us.

A clear intention will take you a long way. So before you get started, think about what will make it worth your while to engage with this material.

What has to happen for you to say, 'Yes, that was time well spent and I am delighted I did that'? How comfortable are you with surprise, with changes to the script and with trying something new?

A journey of themes

Easy contains principles and themes. The principles are summarised in the acronym LIFEPASS, which is the subject of Chapter 2. They are general concepts that can be applied in many ways. The themes are:

Making life and work easy

Everything proposed in this book is easy. Imagine that the choices you make are on a continuum. On one side of easy lies difficult. There's no need for anything I recommend to be difficult for you. In fact, if it is, then you are missing a better choice. On the other side of easy is easier. Sometimes what will serve you best is easy, but there's often an option of something that is even easier that turns out to be a poorer choice.

So how easy is easy? It may be that the book makes things easy for you, but not necessarily easier. I was impressed by Allen Carr's [1] book on giving up smoking. Admittedly I read it as a non-smoker, but it was clear that giving up smoking is easy and that continuing to smoke is easier.

That's because stopping smoking requires maybe a few days of mild withdrawal from the addictive pangs of nicotine. It's a mild withdrawal, he says, and no stronger or longer lasting than say a feeling of hunger before you eat. When the addictive feeling of needing nicotine kicks in, it is easy not to satisfy it: even heavy smokers will refrain from satisfying it if they are in a restaurant or other non-smoking environment, for example. But it is easier to give in. So not smoking requires a choice and a commitment.

Allen Carr writes, 'The beautiful truth is - it's easy to stop smoking. It's only the indecision and moping that makes it difficult'. He categorises smoking as an addiction, not a habit. Addictions and habits each have distinctive strategies for change. Most English drivers arriving in France will swiftly and easily change their habit of driving on the left side of the road.

Safety and risk

When you feel sure about what is going to happen, you feel you have knowledge. That is comforting, powerful and safe. Yet most of our certainties about how life is going to go - even over the next few days - are illusory. What appear to be safe bets are still bets, with associated risks and downsides. When we appreciate the fallibility of plans and the emergent nature of most of what's going on, we can position ourselves more appropriately on the scales of safety and risk. It's a good idea to be more comfortable with uncertainty.

I've been working with a major art gallery where many of the staff say that they are attending too many meetings. Going to all those meetings is familiar, expected, but somehow unsatisfactory.

All members of the staff could take more risk, along a sliding scale. For example, they could contribute more purposefully at a meeting, choose to give certain meetings a miss, or

propose a new policy to remove half the meetings from the agenda.

I don't know how safe any of those tactics might be. It's also a matter of perspective. In the short-term, no comment may equal no risk. But silently subscribing to current poor practice might carry a long-term risk of being overlooked when the organisation is searching for its brightest talents and potential leaders.

Confidence

If we treat confidence as something we do rather than as an inner quality that we 'have', we can achieve extraordinary results in our everyday interactions. Instead of wondering how much confidence we have or where it all vanished to, we can relax into an ease in presenting ourselves.

See what happens, for example, when you unfold your limbs to take up more space. If you act as if the room belongs to you, you will appear more comfortable to be there, and in a job interview, say, that could tilt the balance in your favour.

It takes skill to pitch your status marginally below that of an interviewer. An improvisational approach encourages you to see the encounter in those terms, to recognise the skill and develop your ability to be confident on demand.

If you teach yourself to appear with status and authority, you'll reduce the pressures of unnecessary perfectionism and fears of failure.

Creativity

We are all creative and have means of expressing ourselves. Sometimes we transform our results simply by re-arranging our immediate environment, so that it prompts and enhances our creativity.

Forget the myth of the lone genius. Instead, meet your Muses. Start playing and discover the potential of co-creation. Your creativity will emerge in better presentations, richer stories and fabulous performances, both formal and informal.

Young children waste no time on wondering whether or not they are creative. They will paint, draw and sculpt willingly, until adults inculcate a fear of being judged. It's the prospect of judgement, rather than a lack of creativity, that inhibits us.

All it takes to redeem our creativity is to have a go. Are you in an environment that supports or inhibits creativity? Some organisations welcome ideas; in others there is a culture in which sarcasm and brutality crush them instantly. Then it is no surprise that people stop sharing their delicate ideas. Perhaps we eventually cease sharing them even with ourselves - and that's what we mean when we tell ourselves we are not creative.

Resilience

Resilience is also known as bouncebackability - a word popularised in England by Crystal Palace football team manager Iain Dowie. When his team was losing, at half-time he gave them an inspirational dressing-room talk; in the second half they caught up and won, and he said, 'my team, they have bouncebackability.' [2]

Resilience is about recovering when it's tough, overcoming difficulties and making progress even when it's not easy. This means making smarter use of our resources. And to improve our resilience we may need to do battle with perfectionism - the urge to get things right all the time and thus usually feeling dissatisfied with our less-than-perfect results - and change our attitude towards mistakes.

Teamwork

Good teamwork depends on how skillfully you collaborate with other people. In teams we find phenomena such as co-creativity, self-organisation and emergence.

They arise from interactions between people as they make new connections - connections with each other and with their creative impulses. Little of significance is achieved alone.

When improvising, you discover what happens only as you do it. It's the art of making up a bedtime story with your children. It's designing paths in a public park by noticing where people prefer to walk. It's agile software development, which hinges on involving the customer in testing each step of the design rather than entrusting it entirely to computer-literate engineers.

Such processes allow for surprise and for adapting to new discoveries. Rather than fight or flight when the unexpected happens, you'll learn to flow.

Personal identity, connection and authenticity

We will use games to solve problems and through play learn to accurately identify our resources. These interactions will help us discover who we 'really' are and expand our range of personal possibilities.

There's a strong sense in which Improvisation equals honesty. The games we propose invite you to inhabit the moment and to strip away artifice. You may view this as a risk or as a promise.

When you are a touch more vulnerable, you open up possibilities of more rewarding responses from others. And whatever the response you get from others, you certainly reconnect to your own creativity. And in this reconnection you risk putting something into the world that may be rejected or even mocked. Or, if you are lucky, celebrated.

If you are a teacher, a leader, involved in healthcare or any service provision, then reaching other people is part of your mission. You are inviting them to play and you can do that only by being playful. The task is getting people to engage, to participate in your professional game.

In this book, you will find many exercises and processes for making these faster and deeper connections with other people.

When you improvise you are increasing the chance of connecting with others - and by doing so, you are constantly creating and re-creating you own identity. As my colleague Isolde Fischer puts it, 'Every interaction with others defines our own identity'. [personal communication, 2015]

Games can solve problems

Games develop skills. Much of the improviser repertoire was devised originally by theatre practitioners such as Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal (and many others) to solve problems either in theatre or in education. They discovered neat and easy ways to get people to express themselves better, to coax children to speak more loudly and to encourage good teamwork. It was a happy accident that these devised activities turned out to be watchable, prompting the recent incarnations of the performance side of improvisation.

You'll meet these and other characters, discovering their contributions to a rich and diverse perspective on life. We'll explore how they have nurtured the tradition of improvisation and created a coherent intellectual landscape.

When I hear the word 'Improvisation'

What comes to mind when you hear the word 'Improvisation'?

I've been asking this question in many conversations, workshops and courses. Most of the answers fall into three categories.

First, we get the emotional responses. Quite a few people admit that they feel scared about improvisation. Others say that they are excited, nervous, curious or even mystified. The words 'fun' and 'laughter' also tend to pop up.

These are all natural emotions to feel when confronted with aspects of improvisation, such as the unknown and the unpredictable. It's why it makes a lot of sense in workshops to create an atmosphere of safety, in which people feel more comfortable in facing discomfort. They learn and enjoy more when they feel emotionally equipped for an adventure into new territory.

The second category is the contexts in which people have met improvisation. The list includes theatre, comedy, jazz, dance, sport, fighting and cooking. One or two people have mentioned 'improvised explosive devices' or IEDs as they are known to professionals.

This tells us that there may be a common thread of improvisation that we can recognise independent of context.

In this category too, specific shows and stars are called out. 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?', Tina Fey, Larry David, Paul Merton, Josie Lawrence, The Comedy Store Players, Chicago. Seeing these shows and people is often an entry point, one's first exposure to improvisation.

The third cluster is characteristics of improvisation. People say, 'unplanned', 'thinking on your feet', 'in the moment', 'novelty' and 'unscripted'. Some of these lean to the positive - 'building the plane while flying it'; some negative - 'winging it'. And there are mentions of technical elements, such as 'Yes... And', 'Being in the moment', 'Making your partner

look good', 'Accepting offers', and so forth. We'll unpack these technical terms as we go along.

The range of responses provides a richer picture than a definition or even a description. If we need a definition, I offer 'Freedom within structure' or 'The interplay of freedom and structure' or even more simply, 'Making use of what's there'.

A dictionary definition of improvisation includes the idea that improvisation takes place without preparation. That's potentially misleading because everything one has done in life up to the moment of improvisation potentially informs what one does at that moment. There are several senses in which one can be prepared to improvise.

I recall one comedian starting a show by announcing, 'you're probably wondering how I got here. Well, I was born in Manchester, and ....'.

Similarly Jeremy Hardy, one of my favourite comedians: 'I come from a large family - mammals'.

It's all a question of context and perspectives.

When you first encountered Improvisation, was your experience positive or negative? And how has that shaped your perceptions since?

When did you successfully bounce back?

What games have you enjoyed playing?

Would you like a dictionary definition? [3]

Improvisation
Line breaks: im¦pro|visa|tio
Pronunciation: /ɪmprəvʌɪˈzeɪʃn /
Noun

[mass noun]
The action of improvising: she specializes in improvisation on the piano; improvisation is a performer's greatest creative act

[noun] Something that is improvised, in particular a piece of music, drama, etc. created spontaneously or without preparation: free-form jazz improvisation.

Improvisation: it's only natural

When we talk about Improvisation, we'll be turning it into an almost technical term. It will mean something special amongst those of us who are choosing to read about it, write about it or study or practice it. We'll develop that meaning of Improvisation with a capital 'I'.

First, though, let's examine examples of how it appears in everyday conversations - the natural language use of the word.

If we go shopping with a carefully prepared list of items to buy, following an enticing recipe to offer a meal to our invited dinner guests, we are not improvising. If someone shows up a day later and we create a lunch on the spot from whatever we find in the cupboard, then we are improvising a meal (people will say). Both can be satisfactory occasions. While we might enjoy one feast more than the other, there's no reason to suppose one to be superior in nature to the other as an event.

If I suspect it's going to rain, I'll take an umbrella. That's planning. If I'm caught in the rain unexpectedly, I might improvise by covering my hair with a plastic bag. Again, no judgement as to which is preferable, unless you pity my lack of foresight or admire my gift of quick-witted invention.

When I'm playing tennis, I sometimes find myself in a position relative to the ball that I'd not anticipated, and with

luck I can improvise a shot - on a good day, between the legs, Federer-style. ‘Well-improvised!' I hear the commentators say in the imaginary broadcast in my head.

These are examples of improvisation in everyday life and language, rather than in any technical sense that you might hear from a group of players in improvised comedy or consultants specialising in applying improvisation with teams or organisations.

They involve a person making use of what's immediately available - accessible resources applied in the moment. It seems to be the particular sort of moment when there is no plan or the plan no longer caters for what's needed just then. In the theatre, improvisation is contrasted with scripted theatre, with the script serving as the plan. Similarly in jazz, when improvising musicians depart (deliberately) from the usual sequence of notes in the song.

We improvise all the time, and this goes unremarked. Conversation is not scripted, but that facet is usually not worth mentioning. Someone was walking and spontaneously went to the left of the person approaching: so what!

Part of what's impressive about successful improvisations is the creativity that's apparent in the novel adjustment to the situation, the clever new use of resources (including skills). We notice that good improvisers deal well with uncertainty. They don't get stuck. They experiment, try something new, take a small step to discover what works. They show skills in adapting the available resources to the situation, or in adapting themselves to the circumstances.

Improvisation is easy, like breathing is easy. We do it all the time, mostly unconsciously, mostly without effort. Like breathing, when we bring it to awareness, we pay more attention to how we do it, and are able to make deliberate changes.

When we do so, it seems at least for a while to be less natural, losing something of its spontaneous nature. That's a particular paradox for improvisation, whose nature is spontaneity. Still, it is apparent that we can study improvisation and reflect on improvisation. We can prepare to improvise.

Another improvisational paradox is 'the paradox of effort'. If you put a lot of effort into being playful, you'll tend to experience more of the effort than of the play. If you don't try, it gets easier and you get more from it.

In his book, 'Trying Not To Try'[4], Edward Slingerland notes the elusive nature of spontaneity, tracking the quest through strands of ancient Chinese philosophy. Slingerland writes, 'Our modern conception of human excellence is too often impoverished, cold, and bloodless. Success does not always come from thinking more rigorously or striving harder'.

Perfectionism is trying to get something absolutely right. It speaks of effort rather than ease, and risks killing creativity. Excessive goal-setting limits our success rather than encourages it.

When have you been improvising recently? Which of your improvisations are worthy of mention?

How easy is easy?

Sometimes what sounds easy is not. For example, it seems easy to learn from books. Yet that can be strangely tricky in practice, particularly if the learning requires activity beyond the reading.

Here's an experiment. I'll give you an instruction.

Please stand up.

Now a number of things may have happened. Either you will have stood up or you won't have. If you did stand up, congratulations, you are a reader who will learn a great deal from the book, if you continue to put the exercises into practice. Please sit down now, too, if you've not already done so.

I'm guessing most readers will not have stood up. Why not? Standing up is easy, by any definition. We stand up many times each day, unless we are physically disabled in some way.

But standing up when asked to in a book raises issues of appropriateness and timing: 'What am I standing up for?' There was no reason given with the instruction. It may have seemed pointless or at least in need of further justification. Simply to illustrate an author's point may not be a strong enough reason: I'll get the point just as well by not standing up. Here I am reading - not being any more active than that. If I feel like it, I'll stand up later if and when it suits me.

Fine, but what if the learning depends upon what happened in that moment. It turns out not to be so easy. It gets stuck on a ledge of what is actually a small difficulty, because it seems pointless. Standing up here will make no difference to anyone. It's easier not to do it.

And if I'm reading this in a café, on a train or other public place, then standing up will appear odd to those around me, maybe embarrassing to myself, so the cost of doing so outweighs the apparent ease. That's likely to be true whether I'm with people I know or (in a different way) with strangers.

I practice the Alexander Technique and sometimes I stand up, sit and stand again several times, in public, and have realised that few people notice and no-one seems to care. But it didn't start out easy (in my mind), and there remain many places I'd prefer to not do that. You can find out more

information about the Alexander Technique on the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique [5five] website.

How might you benefit from this book?

I have taught many improvisation classes, and after each one I have asked what participants gained. These are some of the results you can expect:

> *Think on your feet and respond to situations more effectively*
>
> *Get more confident in tricky social situations*
>
> *Express your views more readily and with greater presence*
>
> *Worry less about people's perceptions about you*
>
> *Be more comfortable with uncertainty, change and confusion*
>
> *Have more fun in your life*

Tricky and uncertain situations are seldom the most comfortable; but we can be more comfortable about our inevitable challenges, more aware of our emotions, and more connected to our own resources and skills for dealing with discomfort.

The biggest lesson is ....

In 2014, Kathy Klotz-Guest [6] asked the Applied Improvisation Network Facebook group for 'one-sentence responses' to the following statement: ' The biggest lesson (life, business, whatever) improv has taught me is...?'

And these were some of the responses:

> *Play is the most fruitful work possible*
>
> *Being a 'grown up' is highly subjective and mostly pretend*

Barriers are only in our heads, by having fun with a 'Yes' we push them down & encourage others to do the same

Stay curious and teachable

Run full tilt towards what you don't know

To pivot!

To say 'Yes… And'

Being in the moment with others - with all of the possibilities before you – is a lovely place to be.

Building something with others is always better than what you could make by yourself

Everything is an offer

How to remain open and mindful

Give gifts and listen carefully

To be ready

That embarrassment is a choice

That failure is OK

To say yes

To fail boldly and with vigor

That there are no mistakes

That a group can create genius not possible from an individual

Anything there that might be useful for you to learn? Especially if that learning turned out to be easy? As you'll see later, I'm not so sure that there are no mistakes or that failure is to be encouraged - although these might be useful temporary tactics or perspectives in the setting of an improvisation workshop.

What do you want?

Knowing what you want is important. When you know where you are going, you can notice when you have arrived. Clarifying what you want enables you to set a clear intention and means you are more likely to recognise elements of what you desire as they occur. Not everything you want will be made more likely by the practice of improvisation. But improvisation principles and skills certainly unlock the path to everything listed above, and probably to much else of value too.

Viola Spolin

Viola Spolin was an educator in America in the mid-20th century, who wrote several books, including 'Improvisation for the Theater'[7] and 'Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook' [8]. Many of her activities are used now in improvisation classes and performance. She followed in the tradition of Neva Boyd who invented playtime for schools. Schools previously offered only lessons with no play.

Boyd and Spolin recognised the importance of playing to play - for creativity, health and development. This turns out to be advantageous for adults as well as children.

Spolin's son Paul Sills founded Second City, a Chicago-based improvisation and theatre company, which is arguably the most influential in the development of improvisation performance in America and possibly the world.

Viola's students include Gary Schwartz, who continues the tradition at Applied Improvisation Network conferences and in his workshops around the world.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

What matches do you see between what you want and the concepts that you associate with improvisation?

What gives you hope that improving your improvisation will help you with your wish list?

2 LIFEPASS

This chapter introduces LIFEPASS, the collection of concepts and principles that will guide you through all the activities into taking a more aware, skilled and reflective path.

Your LIFEPASS to creativity and confidence

LIFEPASS is a handy acronym to describe the principles that make life easy.

The 'L' is for Let go

We can usefully let go of much in our lives. Here we especially mean letting go of perfectionism and letting go of the plan.

When we let go of needing to be perfect, we are no longer bound by our own stringent guarantee that things will definitely turn out right. We become free to have a go.

Similarly, we can let go of the plan. The plan is not divine (not usually, anyway). So if it's not working out for the best, what are you going to do? And how comfortable will you be to do it?

If it's not working, either change it (flex the plan) or dispose of it (let go)!

We may let go of the process or the outcome or both. Letting go of any particular process allows for exploration. The plan is replaced by an invitation to try, test and experiment. If we let go of a particular outcome, we see what happens without pressure. Each experiment produces a result. Those results may prove useful, depending on what we want to accomplish next.

'Have a go' is a call to action. If you are stuck, then doing something - practically anything - will produce change, and probably create useful momentum. In complex circumstances it's impossible to guarantee the right outcome. Have a go. The world will respond and that will guide the next step - which may be easier, partly because your perspective will have changed and partly because you are already in movement - you are an agent, actively participating.

The 'I' is for Inhabit the moment

Bring your attention to Here and Now. 'Here' refers to being present in space. 'Now' is being present in time. Inhabiting the moment is a full-body sport that results in tremendous presence. If your mind wanders to the past or the future, or your attention is on what's happening someplace else, you no longer inhabit the moment.

It's about directing attention in a relaxed yet focused way, so that we attend with the necessary degree of detail to the matter at hand, while maintaining sufficient peripheral attention to keep us safe or to signal when to move on.

When you are present in the moment, you have no anxiety about the future or the past. You are conscious only of now.

In contrast, you could be thinking about the past - for example, reviewing whether you did something right or wrong. Or you could be placing your attention in the future, concerned about what might go right or wrong, or wondering what you'll be having later for your dinner.

Looking back and looking forward are both remarkable human abilities with infinite uses. Here we are contrasting those time perspectives with the 'Now', to illustrate the improvisational moments, with their particular set of skills and characteristics.

Both past and future orientations take our attention away from the 'Now'. Inhabiting the moment usually involves trusting (at least temporarily) that things will look after themselves as we move through time.

Getting fully into the moment is among the aims of meditation and mindfulness practices. As the comedian Arnold Brown observed, 'Meditation is better than sitting around doing nothing all day'.

You will find techniques in the practices of meditation and mindfulness for letting go of our natural tendencies to put our attention in to the past and the future. 'Now' is the time. 'Here' means keeping our attention on where we are located. It's retaining focus on our physical presence and physically-located relationships with each other.

By contrast, we could be 'Now' but not 'Here', if our thoughts turn to something going on elsewhere simultaneously - I wonder whether my team is winning its match, or if my house may be on fire because I left something burning.

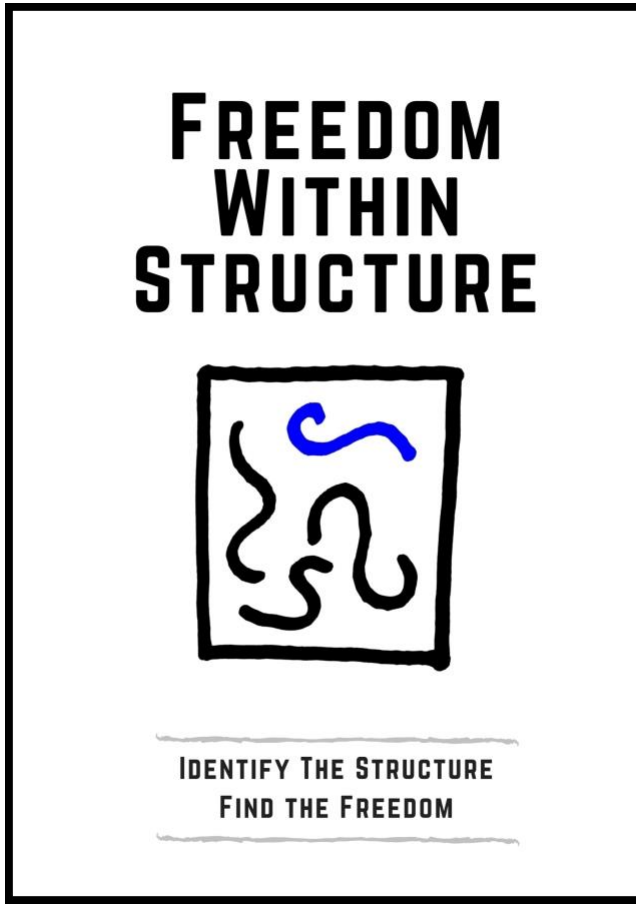
What may be distinctive about improvisation within the range of mindfulness practices is the improvisers' awareness of the social as much as the personal. When we are interacting with other people, staying in the moment is as likely to be dynamic and exciting, as reflective and intense.

Yet I suspect that our focus on the ‘Here’ and the ‘Now’ is a quest for the same objectives sought by meditators and mindfulness practitioners.

We are swapping back and forth with our awareness. First it is closely focused, with our attention narrowly and directly on, for example, our partner’s movement. Next, or even simultaneously (researchers may tell us), it is peripheral; we swiftly scan what else is going on.

Even if you are focusing narrowly on what you are doing right now with one other person, it is still important to have that peripheral attention for when it matters to stop; for example, when events occur that you need to respond to or that are out of the ordinary - beyond the immediate confines of your activity. When you inhabit the moment in an improvisation, you are experiencing mindfulness in action.

The 'F' is for Freedom within structure



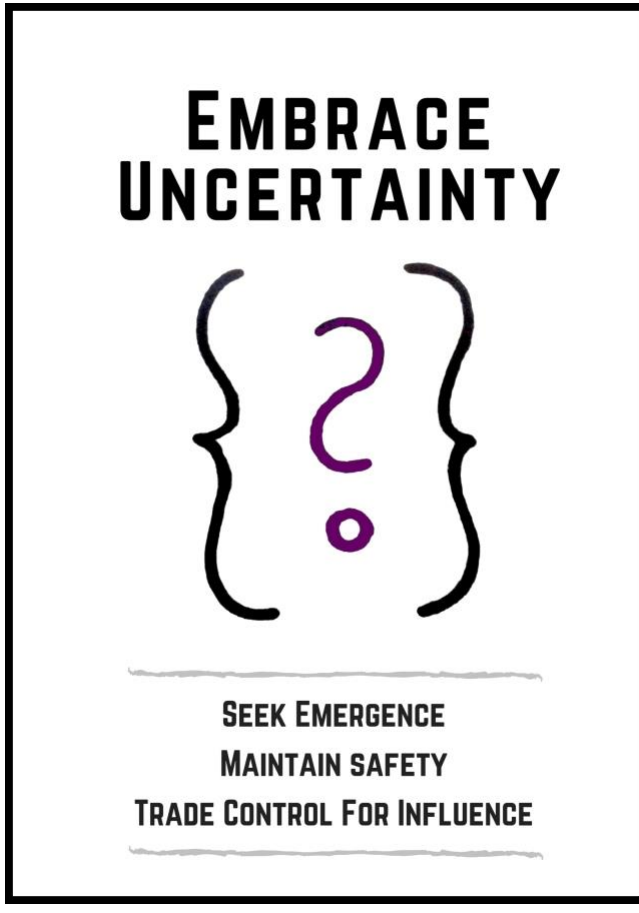
'Freedom within structure' is a useful definition of improvisation. There is a skill in identifying a structure (such as a set of rules) and the freedom which that structure permits for any number of possibilities (as every playing of the game is different).

People often think first of the 'freedom' in improvisation. The structure is equally important, and you can't have one without the other.

There is always freedom to be found in any structure. Whenever we create an experience, we are providing a structure. An individual activity has a structure - rules or moves that are allowed; players choose which move to make.

A plan is another type of structure. Plans should be changed as circumstances shift. Typically, the more 'improvisational' we get, the more comfortable we grow with the freedom part of the equation. This may come with experience.

The 'E' is for Embrace uncertainty



Much of life is unpredictable. It is subject to emergence - what happens as it happens, in a space of uncertainty. There is little value in pretending we know what the result will be when we don't. It makes sense to trade the illusion of control for the reality of influence.

We often have choices of how much risk to accept. As we make these choices, we may want to keep our feet on the ground, to maintain a degree of safety. Feeling safe boosts our feelings of confidence, so that we may be willing to embrace further uncertainty.

Improvisational activities can be nerve-racking to begin with. It's natural to feel cautious when facing something that you have never done before. Typically, as you experience an improvisational game, you discover, 'Oh, that's not so bad.' You contribute, you get it and you start to participate more fully.

Soon you begin to anticipate and enjoy the uncertainty by being more comfortable with it. You gain the excitement, reward and adventure of playing with unknown outcomes.

The 'P' is for Play to play

Some games have clear winners and losers, and the only point for many participants is to play those games to win. The extreme emotional results are triumph or despair. Hence the saying, 'There's no such thing as a friendly game of chess'.

Some of us enjoy the game no matter what. I've chased the ball and had a good work-out. I enjoyed the tactics of each point, and while it's nice to win, it's OK to lose. What's great is to enter 'the zone' or a state of flow. I play to play.

I might also use the experience of playing to learn. The game affords me an opportunity - without the real world consequences of many other situations - to observe, notice,

test and experiment. I play to learn. There's learning to be gleaned during the game, and by reflecting afterwards there may be learning to transfer beyond the game.

Games are playgrounds in which to build skills, create and test models of the 'real' world, and find answers to problems. Games are played, and as Brian Sutton-Smith observed, 'The opposite of play is not work, it is depression'. [8]

Being playful means you are engaging and being flexible. When you are less engaged with the world and when you are more rigid and unresponsive, you are more likely to become suppressed and depressed.

What if work were more like play? It's a rare workplace that can't be improved by having a more playful approach.

There's a strange phenomenon in which gaining more responsibility as an adult is often accompanied by a loss of the joy of play. Did you reach a moment as a child when you felt you had to stop playing with your toys? 'I'm too old to be doing this; I have to start acting like an adult.' There's a danger of draining the enjoyment out of the play even while you're still playing. The answer is not to stop playing; it is to seek and create better games, games that are more sophisticated, more demanding, teaching new lessons.

You could use improvisation games, for example, to study status transactions.

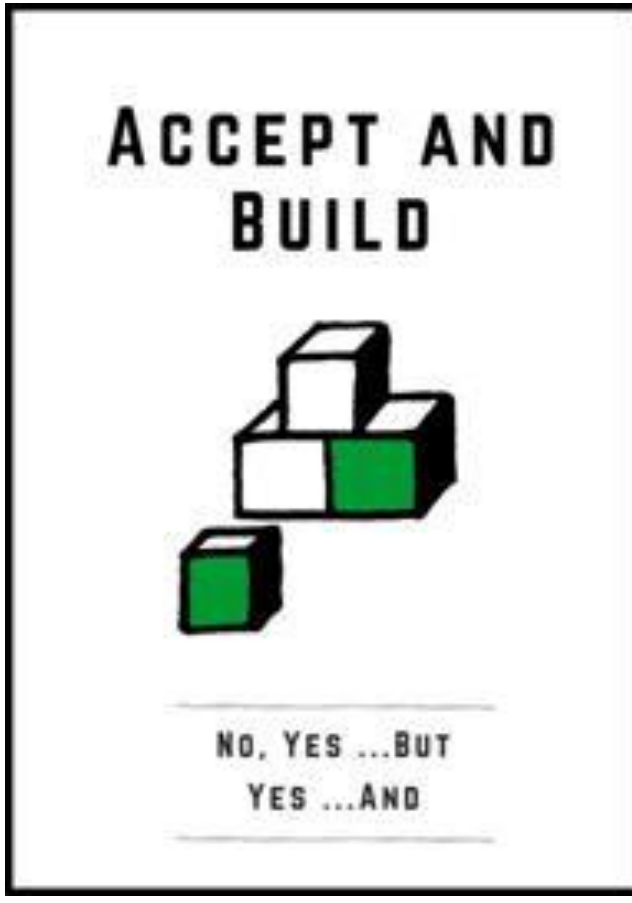
Status is the dynamic of who is up and who is down as any interaction progresses.

That means that every game allows you to experiment with status. It's an ever-flexible set of indicators of who is high, who is low; who is dominating, who is striving, who is submitting. The status transactions have a big impact on who wins and how everyone feels about the results.

When you get skilled at raising and lowering your status in relation to other players, you can readily apply this ability to increase your influence in work and social settings. You can defuse tension in a conflict, for example, by acknowledging a wise point made by the other party – a classic raise-their-status move.

Even participants in improvisation classes tend to detach their privileged playfulness from the rest of life. We say, 'It's so good that we're doing this.' And then the next day we return to a different land, that of the non-playful. Taking a break from the day-to-day may be useful, but the greater value would be in a more permanent transformation.

The 'A' is for Accept and build



'Accept and build' - often captured in the phrase 'Yes... And' is the lifeblood of improvisation. It appears in every improvisation book ever written. And yes, I've checked.

Accepting is not the same as agreeing. Accepting is hearing what's on offer and taking account of it as part of the 'Here' and 'Now'.

We choose between many responses to what's presented to us. These include 'No', 'No but' and 'Yes but' – any of which may be appropriate, but none of which would be accepting and building.

To ‘Accept and build’ requires an attitude (which may or may not include saying the actual words) of ‘Yes’ and ‘And’. The ‘And’ indicates that you are building on the ‘Yes’. You are adding what’s offered or developing the situation, to complete your turn.

Before we are aware of improvisation, accepting and building is a great challenge for many of us, as it means a radical shift from a default listening stance of an ‘Automatic No’ to a ‘Provisional Yes’.

‘Automatic No’ means you don’t need to listen closely to what people are saying, because you have pre-determined that there is unlikely to be anything new or significantly worthwhile in your conversational partner's words. Only a hint of something extraordinary will catch your attention and switch you into alert mode.

Setting your default to ‘Automatic No’ may be a sensible strategy in life. Most conversations pass by with minimal significance, and their routine scripted quality serves us well enough.

We could consider switching to ‘Provisional Yes’ as a default setting, with mental alerts set up to warn us of the need to bring in an occasional ‘No’ or ‘But’ for safety or preference. The listening is no more difficult than in ‘Automatic No’.

Or we trust ourselves to select those conversations in which a closer listening will take us more into the moment. In these, our responses are more improvisationally selected - based on the specific merits of what we are hearing and noticing.

Different contexts suit different defaults. I’m told that the academic tradition requires an attitude of suspicion and ‘test to destruction’. When that stance of critical analysis is exported from the academic pursuit itself into every meeting with colleagues, staff and students, it becomes terribly wearing.

If you want to create things with other people, 'Yes… And' is generative and fruitful. When one party introduces 'Yes… And', it serves as an invitation to others to join in. When a 'Yes… And' approach is shared, co-creation starts to happen.

If people say 'No' to your ideas a couple of times, what will you do with your next idea? You won't be taking it there again, and if that happens to be your only outlet, you may as well stop having ideas, because that's that. People in such environments may start to think, 'I'm not creative. I don't have ideas.'

In contrast, if people say 'Yes' to your ideas and start building on them, you'll continue to bring them forward. It won't matter that they don't all reach fruition - as long as they get the breathing space to be tested. Then the better ideas survive to flourish in an environment in which they could so easily be killed.

Companies such as Google, Apple, Pixar and Twitter all use improvisation within their organisations.

Their involvement ranges from offering classes as part of professional development to incorporating specific techniques for ideation or co-creation. Some organisations offer staff time to pursue their own ideas, individually or collectively and to work on pet projects.

Organisations that take this approach enjoy significant breakthroughs in innovation. This 'Yes… And' is in their DNA. Several are based in the San Francisco area, where it's commonplace to attend improvisation classes and shows. It's a normal part of what they do, with nothing perceived as special or different about it. It's built in. Meanwhile, in other parts of the world, within most English companies for example, improvisation is treated as unknown, suspicious or unnecessary. Tentatively it enters a side door as festive entertainment.

The success stories from California and elsewhere will increasingly influence the way companies do business, because those that fail to improvise better will be left behind. Whole countries or even whole continents will enjoy or suffer competitive advantages. The most talented leaders will demand outlets for their creative and improvisational impulses.

The first 'S' is for Short turn taking

Short turn taking is the fast track to flow. It tends to accentuate the desirable habits of paying close attention to what others are up to and your part in the ensemble.

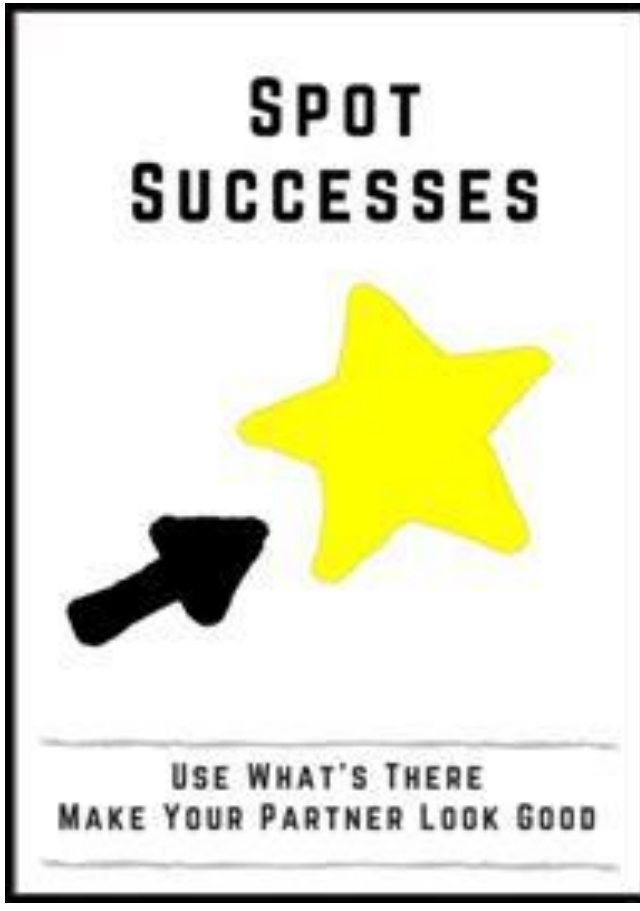
Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow. Leadership emerges and your team self-organises.

Use the jazzy idea of jamming: riffing back and forth, trading notes. That leads you to co-creation. Enjoy the flexibility of switching rapidly between leading and following.

It's the built-in turn-taking that makes racket sports so compelling for players and spectators. It gives dialogue advantages over monologues in theatre and separates good companions from bores in conversations.

If you are a writer, you will enjoy gradual, additive and interactional approaches to your writing.

The second 'S' is Spot successes



We make progress by capitalising on success. Failure is hugely over-rated. If you use what's working, you are on solid ground. Improvisation is making use of the ingredients available to you. You re-arrange the resources to your advantage.

Questions arrive loaded with particular intentions. There's a significant difference between asking people to describe 'something good that happened to you' and 'something that happened to you'. The former reconnects with a positive experience - and if that is shared during a meeting, for example, it changes the emotion and the energy in the room.

Connecting with the positive makes it easier to say 'Yes' to our experience. We mostly enjoy re-connecting with what went well, the successful. We are reminded of our resources, the resources we'll need to make progress from here. Improvisation is about making wise use of resources.

Looking at what didn't work or what's missing is often a recipe for misery, complaint and feelings of inadequacy, and distracts us from the improvisational task of making use of what is there, of what does work.

Milton Erickson and Jesus

There's a classic story about legendary psychotherapist Milton Erikson spotting success and making use of what was there right in front of him.

Noted as a master of utilisation, Erickson was frequently offered the 'impossible' cases that nobody else could solve. At one mental asylum there was an 'un-cooperative' patient who seemed lost in his fantasy of being Jesus.

Erickson said to him, 'You are Jesus; is that correct, it's what everybody told me?' The patient replied, 'That's right, I am.' Erickson responded, 'Okay, I understand then that you are a carpenter?' 'Yes, that's right, I am a carpenter.' And Erickson asked, 'Would you mind making me some shelves?', to which he replied, 'Yes, I will do that.'

By making shelves, a useful and constructive activity, he started to find his way back to mental health. His choice of activity depended on it fitting within his own story. The story was accepted by Erickson as a lever of utilisation. He took a constructive view and made his partner look good.

Erickson was a major inspiration not only for the founders of NLP, but also psychotherapists Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, developers of Solution Focused Brief Therapy [9], which has a significant overlap with improvisation.

If we are collaborating and turn-taking, it's vital to spot the value your partners are contributing. Craft the environment so that they look good, so that what they are doing turns out to be right, helpful and useful.

Suppose you meet someone for the first time and you set yourself the task of spotting whatever is interesting, or committing in advance to at least one favourable response - with minimal preconceptions of what that might be.

You'll hear yourself saying, 'Oh, this looks interesting' and 'I'd like to know more about that'. That's making use of what's there from the hints that the person offers you in the conversation. It's how to make your partner look good.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

Choose an aspect of your life in which you are unnecessarily perfectionist. How can you let go of that inhibiting standard, have a go and enjoy being in the moment?

When can you next be more playful and take shorter turns?

What are three successes in your life that you can say 'Yes' to, and build upon?

3 From safety to risk

If improvisation is for life, how come we associate it so strongly with the stage?

Once we clarify that connection, we discover how to create safe conditions away from the stage to allow us to play more freely anywhere.

Why 'improv' isn't the same as 'improvisation'

Many people's first exposure to improvisation is a comedy show. It might be 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?' on television, or one of its successors.

Or it may be a live theatre show, presented by one of the illustrious improv groups spawned by Second City (Chicago), BATS (San Francisco), Loose Moose (founded by Keith Johnstone in Calgary), SPIT (Philippines), the Comedy Store Players (UK) or elsewhere in the world.

These groups have provided me with hours of matchlessly great entertainment. I've worked with many of their performers and studied with their directors. Without them as an entry point, inspiration and source, I don't know how we could have reached where we are (wherever that may be). And yet this dominance of (mostly comedic) entertainment and its nature as a performance for an audience also creates a limiting lens.

Let's make a distinction between Improv and Improvisation. Improv is the word for all the entertainments, a brand that promises a group of players who will make something up on the spot. If they do it well, it will be entertaining, and will fit a form that is generally announced beforehand – a bunch of sketches; a Shakespearean-style play; a 'Harold', the name given to a Chicago format originated by Del Close.

Improv for the audience succeeds or fails by how entertaining, funny, dramatic or surprising it is. And for the performers it succeeds according to how well they served the audience (to the extent that matters to them) and by artistic criteria, such as the degree to which they stretched themselves as team-players, 'Yes... And-ers' or risk-takers, for example.

Many of these shows are relatively safe forms of improvisation. That's to say, they are reliable, because the formats are familiar and easy for the performers. Though they usually heighten the audience's perception of the risk, and there is no argument but that they are talented improvisers, this is not improvisation right on the edge. The degree of uncertainty is low.

The audience unsurprisingly comes to appreciate the performance and the comedy - as if these were the main constituents of the improvisation. The paradoxical end point of that process is that the less improvised it is, the more it looks like good improvisation. What these shows are, if you like this kind of thing (and I often do), is good entertainment.

Improvisation (as distinct from Improv) is characterised by the particular nature of the freedom within the structure, the degree of uncertainty, the quality of the sure-footedness within the uncertain territory. These dimensions tend to make for less reliable entertainment - unless you enjoy watching people (as distinct from characters) struggle.

'Whose Line Is It Anyway?' [10] was completely safe, because the show was edited before highlights were broadcast. It remains impressive, at least partly because the performers were making stuff up on the spot, and that creates a certain buzz. They kept their sketches short and the performers were encouraged (by the producer and the live audience) to go for laughs - quick gags, even at the expense of the scenes they were collaboratively developing.

So while the show traded on spontaneity, it was spontaneity in the service of entertainment. And if we take that to be all that improvisation is, we'll miss the many manifestations and possibilities of improvisation in non-comedic and non-performing contexts.

One immediate value of making this distinction between improv and improvisation, is that it relieves us improvisers (in life and work) of any pressure to be funny.

Yes, you don't have to be funny. You may turn out to be funny, but not by trying to be funny.

Improvisation to test rules: more ways of responding to life's challenges

Improvisation can mean taking a fresh attitude towards rules and conventions. We can consider preferable responses to always following the rules. New ways might serve us better if we find rules to be outdated and no longer guiding us so usefully, or if they turn out to be inherited from authorities with no legitimacy.

At the least, it is reassuring to identify a rule that governs part of our life and question it to be sure that it continues to serve us well.

When we play improvisation games, we have a privileged opportunity to notice patterns - there's that shudder when we spot ourselves always pointing to the same person in a circle exercise; taking a high status with all partners; defaulting to a risk-averse strategy in a leadership game.

When we notice, we gain the option to change deliberately when our turn comes round again. A game offers an opportunity for safe experimentation.

Improvisation also offers insights into rules we follow in life. Suppose you always felt a tinge of guilt when you decided to

do one thing, then changed your mind when circumstances altered. Well, life is not scripted, so it may be reasonable to change the 'lines' you have so far followed.

There's no need to waste your energy on that feeling, once the moment has gone and you've now - irrevocably - done something else.

As life's circumstances inevitably change, it's necessary to adapt to those changes, rather than resist them because of what you feel you might have done or should have done. This steers you away from the perils of perfectionism, which can be particularly debilitating when they take this kind of retrospective grip on you.

When you made your original decision, it's natural to want to hold yourself to it. But if circumstances have changed sufficiently, then not carrying out your intention does not always mean you've significantly failed or lapsed.

As one participant on a course explained, 'I put the whole of my life's work into that moment; it's like I have never done anything good in my whole life.' Even as he spoke, he realised that he had been over-reacting: there was no reason for allowing that old instant to prove so weighty.

His habit of over-reacting was a rule worth questioning. By questioning it, he could choose a more proportionate response to such circumstances. Here we have a process that offers a more sophisticated method of holding yourself to account than, 'I must be perfect'.

Some improvisation games freeze the moment of choice, allowing you to examine different options. In an activity I learned from Mick Napier of The Annoyance Theater [11], one player offers a line of dialogue - typically a mild confession - to another. The second player gets to respond to the same line three times in a row, in three different ways. It's fascinating to experiment with different responses, to

note your creativity and options, and to test which might be more comfortable or productive for similar real-life scenarios.

Even if it's usually appropriate to obey a particular rule and you happen to fail to follow it on one occasion, it probably does not mean that everything is now ruined or lost. It makes sense to minimise self-blame and get on with making the best of whatever position now presents itself to you. This is part of the art of recovery and resilience.

In terms of LIFEPASS, we recall the concept of 'Let go' - and we can practice 'disposability'. If you get bored with a task that matters only to you, throw it away. Start again or move on to something else. And notice when that becomes easy for you to do.

Many of the most questionable rules are those that others have set us. We might feel obliged to live up to other people's expectations, even if they were never our own choices. When people talk about finding themselves or being allowed to be themselves, this is often what they are dealing with.

Only when we start offering stronger statements on our own behalf in conversations or meetings do we discover - and test - what we are thinking. Without that, it's difficult to develop strategies for expressing yourself beyond what others want you to be.

One of my friends realised he had a rule of checking every item on a menu before making a choice. He decided to conserve mental energy by quickly selecting one of the first three meals that caught his eye and appealed to his taste buds. As well as increasing his enjoyment of eating out, he had the beginnings of a strategy for dealing with information overload in other areas of his life.

Such interventions raise the question, 'who am I?" From an improvisation perspective, who we are is what we do in

interactions with others. It positions each of us as mutable and always full of potential.

If we become who we are through our social interactions, our response to expectations is especially crucial - and a novel action is likely to change your colleagues' next response to you. Life as Improvisation is an interactional sport.

We gain strength in that sport by noticing the impact we have on each other - and the emergent exchange between us is the created improvised product.

Let's start to build the skills that make us better at interacting with others, so that we can fulfill more of our potential.

Here's a foundational activity that develops our skill of consciously directing attention.

Paying attention

A foundational skill in improvisation and arguably for success in life is paying attention.

The idea is to get good at noticing how things are and how they work, especially when they are working well.

Part of this is developing our ability to direct our attention to where we want it to be - choosing to attend rather than not attend; then directing our attention, whether broadly like a searchlight or narrowly like a laser beam.

Do you know where your attention is now?

Let's have a play, with an activity that will take about five minutes. Find somewhere to walk around, indoors at home or out in a park. Start walking however you like, taking your own time, getting used to your awareness of how you walk and to the space in which you are walking.

Notice your pace. If there are other people around, are you moving at the same speed as anyone else or at a different speed; with the same or with different step lengths? Is your speed influenced by other people's pace? By a musical rhythm? Or something else?

Now notice how your body is, your feelings of relaxation or tension in different parts of your body.

Experiment with moving a little slower, then a little faster; with more energy and with less; more smoothly and more jaggedly. Change the way you turn and the stretch of your limbs.

And notice what your mind is up to. Get aware of your awareness. As Stafford Beer [12] once said, 'Think before you think'. You control your attention to an extraordinary degree. For example, recall something that happened yesterday. Just like that, you direct your mind to the past.

Similarly, at will, you have the gift of turning your attention to the future. Think of an event that you know will happen later today. In thinking about the future, you can even distinguish between what you expect to happen and your imagination of something that you might enjoy but that is unlikely to happen. Even if the imagery is equally detailed, you know the difference.

And now turn your attention to what's happening in this instant. Observe details about yourself or about the room, directing your awareness to the present.

So you have experienced the time dimensions of past, future and present, selecting where (in time) to direct your attention.

Similarly with space, you make choices. Let's start with what's inside you. Think internally within your skin - tune in

to your breathing or assess the degree of tension in a particular set of muscles.

Now turn your attention to the skin itself - your surface. Feel the ambient temperature. Are you aware of any draught or a breeze?

And take your radar beyond your own surface to what is around you - making itself known through the senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell.

In improvisation we bring awareness to 'Here' - our physical relationship to what is immediately around us - and 'Now' - what's happening in the moment. This gives us immediate access to our own physical resources, so that we interact with our surroundings with more presence. Our precision and control enable us to make fuller use of whatever might be present.

This focus also removes the distractions of judgement about the past, concern about the future and the lure of our imagination wandering to what might be going on elsewhere.

While this is a satisfyingly thorough grounding exercise in a workshop, it is easy to import it into a work setting, such as your arrival at an important meeting or presentation. Similarly, you can use any or all of it to reconnect yourself to the here and now whenever your thoughts or feelings run away with you. Download a free audio of this visualization by using the link at the end of the book.

Why safety matters

Life tends to be easier when you know what to expect. You feel more comfortable when you are in familiar territory. When a detailed, plausible plan is in place, you think you know what will happen next.

When we improvise, we are by definition entering the unknown; it's going to be something of an experiment. A major reason for learning improvisation is to become more comfortable with the uncomfortable. But the learning experience should be no more uncomfortable than necessary.

We often make learning difficult for ourselves (or our teachers make it difficult for us), even when it can so easily be made easy.

For example, an improvisation workshop does no favours to its participants by appearing unplanned or experimental. On the contrary, it might be better for it to feel very safe - as a holding structure - so that within it you can play with the improvisational elements of the unknown and the unfamiliar.

When people encounter improvisation, they are often naturally nervous. An improvisation class is exciting to some, daunting to others. Any workshop, course or programme is also a learning environment, which means people have come to experience novelty and change. This can be nerve-wracking, irrespective of any improvisational content.

Such circumstances dictate the value of a well-designed structure that takes care of people, so that they can learn effectively, which people usually do best in a state of relaxed attention, not states of fear and confusion.

For these reasons, safety is really important when you attend any improvisation workshop. This means psychological safety, as well as physical. If there is anything you are asked to do that you are not comfortable to do - for any reason whatever - remember that it's your legitimate choice to say, 'No, I'm not going to do that one.'

An improvisation class need be no more (or less) stressful or safe than a class in painting, metalwork or gardening.

At some point in a climbing class, you'll be expected to climb; in a fire safety session, to put out a fire; and to walk a tight-rope in a course of circus skills. In none of these would you relish being put in any unreasonable danger or subjected to stress.

Stress tends to reduce our level of performance. To get good at any skill it helps to be focused and relaxed. This is as true for developing our improvisation capacity as any other.

In improvisation activities, you are likely to reveal your spontaneous self, showing aspects that surprise yourself or those around you. It's helpful to be able to participate in such activities feeling calm and confident, not bewildered by wondering what the session (or activity) is all about. It reduces tension if you practice without feeling that you are being judged - whether that means being psychologically assessed for what you might say or do, or on the strength of how compelling your performance is (unless it happens to be a performance class).

When we developed the curriculum for the Improvisation Academy, we told all participants that they were welcome to reveal as much or as little as they wished, as they went along - and that there is absolutely no pressure to perform.

Early in the Improvisation Academy classes, the 'Barn Doors' activity (see below) demonstrates this intent, while allowing people to experience that it's probably OK for them to have a go.

Much of the manifestation of improvisation currently is on stage - as a form of performance and entertainment. You need to learn performance and improvisation skills if you want become an improvisation performer - or even a stand-up comedian.

Equally, if you have no intention whatsoever of going onto a stage, that's fine too, because improvisation skills can be

applied to many other areas of life and in almost any work context - and it is those applications that are of primary interest to us in this book and in the Improvisation Academy.

The stage also serves as a metaphor for many aspects of life. As Mr. Shakespeare said, 'All the world's a stage'. And as Keith Johnstone pointed out in an excerpt from his 'Loose Moose' training manual [13] written in the early 1990s, 'Stages also exist in real life: the bartender is on stage. When we interact with a customer we are improvising the action and the dialogue moment by moment. To continue to function in an efficient and a relaxed way while being stared at is an ability worth having. You can't swim if you're welded into a suit of armour, and you cannot really make good contact with people if you have a secret terror of interaction - no matter how skillfully you conceal it'.

So, following Johnstone, the important aspect is the contact, the interaction; performance (because you are doing something) - without theatricality.

'Barn Doors'

We create a reservoir of safety in a workshop or meeting, not by announcing that it is a safe space, but by demonstrating safety through a practical activity. At the Improvisation Academy, we often begin with an activity that trades on the metaphor of barn doors.

You manufacture the barn doors by covering your eyes with your hands. These are creaky, old barn doors, so there are always some gaps to see through. That affords you a clear enough vision of what is in the room, so that you can move about without bumping into furniture.

Everyone walks around with their eyes (the window to the soul) protected by their 'barn doors'. At any time, you may choose to open the doors just for a moment. Allow yourself the wider view, and allow others to look in.

You decide how much or how little you want to show or reveal at any time. Experiment for a couple of minutes, seeing who and what you encounter.

Exercising one's choice is important here. There are no rights or wrongs within the game. The facilitator may ask participants to reflect on the choices they made, but won't draw attention to who made which choices or favour one over another.

The game simulates a feeling of risk, so that the players can experiment with the degree of risk they take. That's the feeling which we're aiming to maintain throughout the rest of a workshop or program - that it is safe to take more risks within the workshop, because each game and the workshop as a whole is a safe container for such experiments.

Again, you can take a version of the exercise out with you into the world. You often have choice of how much or how little to reveal. You can experiment with imaginary barn doors in personal relationships, for example, flexing your limits of trust and vulnerability to discover the extent to which your friends are willing to accept your foibles or reciprocate your impishness.

Keith Johnstone

'*The reward for saying no is safety and the reward for saying yes is adventure*'.

Keith Johnstone wrote the book 'Impro' [14], which is my favourite book about improvisation. He writes about theatre, but never loses sight of theatre's contexts in life and education. It's amusing, provocative and contains several brilliant activities.

Keith worked with the Royal Court Theatre in London in the 1960s, when the soon-to-be-abolished censorship laws meant scripts had to be submitted

for approval for a licence to perform. This ruled out scriptless improvisation performance, so when Johnstone realised that his improvisation sessions with actors were amusing to watch and benefitted from an audience, he side-stepped the regulations by saying that what he was doing was a workshop or a class.

These days, many performers of short forms of improvisation are still doing Keith Johnstone exercises that are worth watching. It's notable that they were originally devised to solve actors' problems in performing (such as how to be more relaxed, appear more natural, look connected to other characters), rather than as audience pleasers.

Play to risk

There's a rich tradition of party, children's and theatre games that have evolved to generate excitement and risk-taking. Many feature cunning mechanisms of continuity, to keep the players playing rather than being permanently dumped out as losers. Consequences are pleasingly temporary. In games such as 'Kitty Wants a Corner', often players realise that what appears to be a losing position is something else entirely.

In this game, the player in the middle faces someone in the circle and says, 'Kitty wants a corner'. She is rebuffed with the answer, 'Ask my neighbour', with a gesture pointing to the next person in the circle. The middle player now asks that next person, and so on.

Meanwhile, any two players in the circle can make a contract by way of eye contact to cross the circle and exchange places. The player in the middle aims to reach one of the gaps as players cross. If successful, the one who didn't get across becomes the new Kitty.

A player typically begins by doing all in his power to avoid going into the middle and becoming 'Kitty'. You assume that the aim of the game is to stay in the outer circle. At some point, you eventually find yourself in the middle, and you realise it's just another part of the game. Instead of being 'stuck', you have new powers.

That insight is the bridge between two modes of playing: playing to win with winners and losers and 'Play to play'.

When you discover that being in the middle is fine, you increase your rewards from playing on the edge of risk, gaining the bonus of enjoyment and exhilaration from fully participating, being committed and having a go.

Making a move in 'Kitty Wants a Corner' becomes a thrill ride. When you make a contract, you either succeed in getting across (and seeing your partner to safety), or you fail and get something else instead. Either you take on the mantle of being in the middle, or you have somehow sacrificed your partner.

In reflecting on how you chose to play the game, you access insights into where and when you are a risk-taker and where you are not. You may discover aspects of your life in which you wish to increase your risk-taking.

If you notice that you continually sacrifice your partner for your own safety, you might want to check your relationships and level of popularity.

Sometimes players take minimal risk in the game and appreciate the enjoyment of proximity to risk. That's akin to spectator sport, and spectators add value too.

When a sports match is played, there's every difference between those who pay no attention at all and an audience enjoying a range of vicarious thrills, whether quietly rooting for a team, noisily encouraging a player or calculatedly

betting on the outcome. Improvisational games offer you borderlines - opportunities to sometimes be a spectator and sometimes to take it to the next level of immersive participation.

Creativity requires risk. Creativity means doing something new, which may well be uncomfortable. Getting out of your comfort zone often feels risky.

Doing something new feels awkward, physically and psychologically. Other people may have done the new thing before, but the point is that it is new for you. If it's in public, you run the risk of adverse judgement or rejection. You could take that personally or you could take it as an opportunity for growth and self-awareness.

Try this game of 'Acrostic Names'. Write your name (first or middle or surname or any combination), then describe yourself using those letters as the first letters of an acrostic. For example, PAUL = Perhaps An Unknown Legend.

On your own, it's a very gentle exercise in creativity - easy and unchallengeable.

With other players, the stakes are raised. To take a turn to announce one of your acrostic names, you commit to accepting that you have an idea, articulating it on paper and then sharing it with a group.

To express your creation you have to cross the threshold of your own judgement.

If we are harsh self-critics, participating in such activities gives us multiple low-risk opportunities to practice expressing ideas that may not yet be fully-formed, while lowering temporarily our threshold of judgement. The exercise of our creativity muscles will stand us in good stead next time we have the chance to be creative in a more significant setting.

An extension of the 'Acrostic Names' game, for example, might be a greater willingness to contribute more ideas in a brain-storm at work. Maybe it will prove a stepping stone to sharing your creative writing with others.

As well as 'Play to win' and 'Play to play', we can add a third dimension to the purposes of play: 'Play to learn'. By reflecting on what happened when we were playing, we may observe patterns of activity. Sometimes this happens during play, sometimes afterwards. An 'Aha' moment is always welcome.

The importance of play

Play matters and given the overwhelming academic evidence for this it is extraordinary how suspiciously playfulness is treated in work settings.

In his TED talk [15], psychiatrist Dr Stuart Brown, says, 'Play is more than fun'. It has an important biological place in our lives, like sleeping and dreaming. It's not just for children; we need play throughout our lifetime, and it has value beyond rehearsal or preparation for the future.

He mentions improvisers explicitly towards the end of his talk, and it's apparent that different types of play, such as the body play of movement, playing with objects, fantasy, and social play are all addressed within the range of improvisational training activities.

Keith Johnstone guards against play turning back into work. He says, 'If you don't play games with good nature, you're working. And the point about a game is that it doesn't matter if you screw up. If you're a carpenter and you screw up the table-leg, you've lost good wood. I'm not against work, I think work is great, I work a lot; but if you want to play, the consequences must not be important.' [16]

At the same time, most games work only when the players care about the outcome and conform to the rules while they are playing. The result may or may not be consequential, but if no one is trying, all the enjoyment is sucked out.

Bernie De Koven [17] has devised hundreds of games and writes imaginatively about play in his blogs and books. He suggests turning the play-to-win of high jump competitions in schools into a more collaborative play-to-play. In the competitive version the horizontal bar eliminates first those students who most need to practice. If you tilt the bar diagonally, then everyone can select the height at which they can cross. You can even see how many people can jump simultaneously if you get the line-up right.

Given the damage in schools caused by overuse of pass-fail standards, perhaps rather than raising the bar, we should try tilting the bar instead.

What Happy People Do Differently

'One of life's sharpest paradoxes is that the key to satisfaction is doing things that feel risky, uncomfortable, and occasionally bad', say positive psychology pioneers Robert Biswas-Diener and Todd Kashdan.

'Truly happy people seem to have an intuitive grasp of the fact that sustained happiness is not just about doing things that you like. It also requires growth and adventuring beyond the boundaries of your comfort zone. Happy people, are, simply put, curious.

'Curiosity, it seems, is largely about exploration - often at the price of momentary happiness. Curious people generally accept the notion that while being uncomfortable and vulnerable is not an easy path, it is the most direct route to becoming stronger and wiser. In fact, a closer look at the study by Kashdan

and Steger suggests that curious people invest in activities that cause them discomfort as a springboard to higher psychological peaks.

'The happiest among us (cheerfully) accept that striving for perfection - and a perfectly smooth interaction with everyone at all times - is a loser's bet.

The ability to tolerate the discomfort that comes from switching mind-sets depending on whom we're with and what we're doing allows us to get optimal results in every situation.' [18]

Reflection questions: Easy does it

Notice how safe you are being and decide if there is sufficient margin of safety for you to be a little bit more adventurous. Where there's not much at stake, take a fraction more risk and notice what happens. It may be fun, exciting and rewarding.

How can you make your work more playful?

What patterns do you notice when you play?

Where can you safely take more risk?

4 'Yes'

Improvisation is not about being funny, it's about saying 'Yes' to uncertainty. Life is full of uncertainty. With practice, it is easy to embrace it.

Three myths of improvisation

Experienced improvisers tend to be enthusiastic about their craft. Yet many people unfamiliar with improvisation imagine they won't enjoy it. They feel daunted or even frightened by the prospect of an improvisation class or activity. It's a response that goes beyond a natural caution when dealing with the unexpected - after all, we face uncertainty every day.

This degree of doubt may be accounted for by various myths circulating about improvisation. Here are three of the most prevalent.

You have to be funny

One myth says you have to be funny. This myth has two main sources. The first is that many people see improvisers creating comedy shows on stage or on TV ('Whose Line Is It Anyway?' [19] is the most influential example), so they simply equate improvisation with the performance of comedy.

In my view, improvisation is not necessarily about performance, nor about comedy. The second source is that even in contexts where there is no performing, the moment of improvisation is often funny because of the element of surprise. Laughter is generated by wit or by relief from the straitjackets of tension.

Of course it's OK to perform and it's wonderful to be funny. But the principles and techniques of improvisation are not

about being funny, and trying to be funny is generally a mistake. It's also a misleading trap, responsible for excluding people who think they cannot be - or who have no desire to be - funny.

Improvisation is about connecting, listening, adding, engaging with uncertainty, being present in the moment, attending to the here and now. You might do that for the purpose of being funny. Equally, you might be aiming to get more productivity from a team or to be more confident in how you present yourself.

Improvisation is for when it goes wrong

You are often called upon to improvise when things go wrong. Many of the natural language uses of improvisation reflect this. For example, 'It was raining, I did not have my umbrella with me so I improvised some shelter with a sheet of newspaper.' Or, 'we were ship-wrecked on the beach so we improvised a hut.'

But it's not always when something is wrong or plans go awry: it may be that circumstances are slightly unusual or unexpected. You watch a football match and the sports commentator says, 'Oh, he wasn't expecting the winger to make that run, so he's improvised a clever pass inside.'

What if you improvise as a deliberate first choice – with no question of anything having gone wrong? Suppose you know that you will be facing conditions of uncertainty. Or you want to create something new with other people?

In such circumstances it makes sense to choose to improvise. You appreciate that you don't need to have everything planned. Too much anticipation of the details will be too much of a constraint. You are better advised to come in ready to see what happens, to adapt and to respond as events unfold. Prepare for the unexpected, for the genuinely new.

Now you find yourself improvising as things go well, able to delay decision-making until the optimum moment, operating with more information, with timely responses to exactly what's there. This is ease even in potentially difficult circumstances.

This is the quality of improvisation recognised by surgeons, firefighters and the military. You find it in organisations that devolve responsibility to their front-line, because they appreciate complexity and then value what emerges.

One of the first documented cases [20] of applied improvisation training was with the various public services in a Canadian municipality. Initially, the fire department chiefs were skeptical about the merits of such a programme.

In the end the firefighters valued it most. They would be under pressure to drag a passenger from a crashed car, only to find that the door was not quite the same door that they had learned about in basic training. Each new model was slightly different, and the best approach was to be adaptive and ready to respond on the spot. It was in emergencies, at the limits of the known and the expected, that improvisation paid off.

Learning improvisation accompanies a view of the world not as a static, mechanical model with traditional cause-and-effect predictability, but as a more flexible place, in which reality is not a simple and obvious given, but co-constructed as we go along, whether between client and practitioner, or colleague to colleague.

That is the sort of improvisation we're primarily focusing on here: Improvisation by design, where you do it by choice, build your skills and flourish by applying them.

Improvisation is chaos

The third myth says that improvisation is chaos. It's not. There's a continuum from complete predictability, on to complexity and through to complete chaos. Chaos is chaos, where there's no structure, no order and no predictability. There is more chaos in the centre of a star studied by astrophysicists than within even the worst-run organisations on earth.

Improvisation applies best in conditions of complexity - when there's both structure and freedom; planning and responding. A great deal of our lives take place in those conditions.

We are always adapting and responding within the normal circumstances of everyday life. Almost every conversation is unscripted, for example. Unless a journey is utterly routine, it will contain improvisational elements - what you see en route, who you interact with. So it makes sense to think about improvisation as offering support for everyday life, which lies between chaos on the one hand and formulaic fixed structure on the other.

There are doubtless other myths of improvisation; those are three key ones we hear a lot, and it's cleansing to dispel them so that we can get cracking on the bits that matter.

'Drawing With Hands On'

Next is a sequence of activities for exploring how easy it can be to adjust to the unexpected and to reconsider what we mean by 'going wrong' in a creative mode.

This particular sequence contains absolutely no theatre or performance content. You will need pens, paper and a partner. You do not need to be an artist.

We are going to experience the most central concept of improvisation through the medium of drawing.

The sequence is in three parts. The first two I have adapted slightly from activities I learned from Therese Steiner [personal communication, 2014].

The third part is a classic activity from improvisation workshops (mine, anyway), that I've been familiar with for many years and cannot remember where I first saw it. On reflection, it's a slightly unusual activity to find in traditional improvisation workshops, precisely on account of it having no theatrical aspects.

That's noteworthy, as improvisation is currently taught mostly by theatre practitioners and mostly as preparation for performing. Even when not taught for performing, it's often taught as if for performing, with a shift in emphasis during the set-ups and debriefs towards how participants might apply (in life) the learning from their experience in the activity.

There's nothing wrong with such methodologies, unless they blind us to the many other routes to improvisation insights and skills - which include musical, fine arts, movement, conversation and plenty more.

So are you a good artist?

That's a deliberately poor question. While there may be better or worse artists amongst us, our interest here is in creative processes, not in aesthetic judgement. There's a tyranny to such judgement that often holds people back from having a go and simply enjoying an artistic activity.

We are all creative in our own ways and whatever degree of creativity you bring to this activity is sufficient.

In the spirit of aesthetic agnosticism, you may designate either one of you in the pair to be the artist in round one. Or use the traditional way of identifying artists, which is to select the one with the longer hair.

The other partner is designated as ‘the apprentice’, who will learn art at the hand of the master.

The master makes a drawing and the apprentice follows the hand movements of the master artist by touching - placing a hand lightly on the wrist of the artist’s drawing arm.

The artist should do her best to ignore completely that there is a touching hand; don’t let it inhibit your normal artistic expression. The hand sits on the wrist to allow the apprentice to learn; the apprentice follows and allows you to draw whatever you want to draw.

What you draw is up to you. It could be a sketch, a symbol, a pattern or an abstract diagram with lines and curves. There is no right or wrong subject or style. Please allow the apprentice to feel how your hand moves while you are in this artistic mode.

Draw for 30 seconds.

Now let’s find out whether this theory of learning transition actually works. Please swap over, so that the apprentice becomes the artist. And for the artist, it’s never too late for you to learn too, so place your hand lightly on the wrist of your former apprentice.

Starting with a fresh blank sheet of paper, the new artist also has 30 seconds to draw whatever she wants. This may or may not be inspired by what you just saw. If you have another idea that you’d prefer to express, that’s absolutely fine.

Notice that there is now no reason for it to be difficult to think of something. You could shamelessly take the easy option of copying the first artist. In this activity, as in most improvisations, there are no prizes for trying to be original or different. Difference and novelty arise emergently from interactions, not from the conscious effort of an individual trying to be clever, funny or different.

For the second part of the activity, switch back to the first apprentice lightly grasping the wrist of the first artist. The artist has a fresh sheet of paper.

This time the apprentice's task is different. It is to do whatever you can to prevent the artist from drawing, short of hurting the artist. You may use your touching hand to pull, push or disrupt, while the artist tries to draw. Please note you are not allowed to break their wrists or their fingers. Cause mischief, not damage.

The artists' task is to have a go at drawing either the same subject or something different - under these new hazardous conditions for 30 seconds. Again, swap roles, so you each experience both aspects of the second part of the activity.

For the third part of the activity, you need one new sheet of paper and one pen between you. Sit so that you both have a similar perspective towards the page, ready for drawing collaboratively.

You are going to draw a face, one line each at a time, by taking turns to hold the pen. You pass the pen back and forth each time one of you completes a line. A line is defined as the time that the pen is on the paper; when the pen comes off, you have completed your line - whether that's a single dot or a complex series of strokes.

A couple of notes. This works most interestingly as a nonverbal activity; instead of discussing what you are doing, you silently pass the pen across. And it's not an activity of, 'Let me see how long I can keep the pen on the paper and not give the other person a turn.' One of our LIFEPASS concepts is 'Short turn taking'. And this is a good example of a short-turn-taking activity.

The drawing is complete when one of you is holding the pen and deems that the drawing is complete. Instead of drawing another, superfluous line, you begin to name the character

you have drawn. You do this by writing one letter each at a time, still without discussion, each writing the next letter of the name on the page. When you have done that, your artwork is complete.

Illustrating 'Yes'

These activities give us experiential illustrations of concepts that are important in life.

From the 'artist' point of view, it is unusual to have somebody else's hand on yours when you are drawing. By allowing it, the artist is saying 'Yes'. It is giving permission. Similarly, as the apprentice, when you had your hand on the artist's, you were saying 'Yes' to their drawing.

When someone says 'Yes' to you, you can get on with your own preference, whether (in this case) that's making the drawing you intended, or following the movement of the drawing hand.

In the second phase, we had the apprentice stopping the artist; this is equivalent to saying 'No'. It's preventing the artist from drawing as intended. This part of the activity often prompts a lot of laughter, a response to frustration and to the tactics each player uses to get their own way.

When someone says 'No' strongly enough, it gets in our way. 'I can't do it' or, 'I can't do it the way I want to.' And when that happens, the artist has choices. When blocked with a 'No', you might keep trying, working harder to stick to the original course. You might give up. Or you might adjust, going with the movement of the apprentice to see where that leads, or wait for the moment when you are able to impose your own will again.

In the activity, you get a sense of your determination level and a sense of your preferred tactics when someone sets out to frustrate you.

If the ‘No’ is powerful, you may have no choice but to give up. In that case it’s even more appealing to accommodate to the movements. It’s a jazzy or judo tactic to turn the 'No' into a 'Yes'; ‘I am going to do something different and adapt and respond to it’.

‘Yes… And’

The third phase was drawing together, turn taking; this demonstrates the famous improvisational concept of ‘Yes… And’. As is apparent in this activity, you don’t need a verbalisation of ‘Yes… And’; you have the physical drawing experience of 'Yes… And' without those words being used. It is the attitude of ‘Yes… And’ that we are exploring.

The 'Yes' is accepting what the other person has produced up to the point of the turn switch. The ‘And’ is adding your bit to it. Each iteration of ‘Yes… And’ is a short turn.

It means your ideas can gradually or suddenly be turned into something completely different. You may find that disconcerting or wonderful. Whatever your reaction, your choice is either to go with it or to walk away.

Going with it means letting go: you abandon or amend that plan you had.

With improvisation you rarely get the output you expected, at least not in comparison to the lone artist fulfilling a plan in his or her head, in the fashion of Alfred Hitchcock producing a film he had previously imagined in detail.

> ***Improvisation in films***
>
> *Alfred Hitchcock would sketch out his ideas in storyboards, and then shoot the film according to the boards. His actors were rarely invited to improvise, and he judged the success of his project on the extent to which his original ideas (documented in the*

screenplay and the storyboards) were realised in the film.

By contrast, many of the most celebrated moments in films were improvised - made up on the spot by actors going beyond the script. [21a]

In our activity, the face is an example of co-creation. It's not yours alone, it's from you both, generated by you sharing a given structure or set of rules - a face, a name, a definition of turns - to produce freely a particular face and name that could not be predicted. Even if you did the activity again with the same person, it would turn our differently; there is infinite possibility even within a seemingly constricted structure.

What's the best attitude to get the most from such experiences? It's a question worth considering, given that many of life's interactions resemble the activity in key respects.

The answer probably is to treat the experience as an exploration. Curiosity about the process unfolding might serve you better than an expectation that you will control the results.

Staying alert to the details of the process means remaining in the moment.

This also increases the prospect of enjoying a flow state, with benefits for you not only in the process, but also in the results.

In these drawing activities, the 'no-talking' request means you are deprived of many useful verbal tactics, such as explaining, requesting and arguing, that we often use to get our messages across and achieve more of what we want.

The activity prompts an experience of producing results by other means. There's more dependence on taking responsibility for your own interpretations of what a partner might intend, and trusting your partner to work constructively with your offers. If it's not what one of you meant at any point, so be it. You carry on and make use of what's there in whatever way you interpret it.

Everyone quickly adjusts to these new realities - and the skill is avoiding getting hung up with what you hoped would happen, in favour of working with what has actually happened.

With justification removed, there remains no point in beating yourself up about the quality of what you are doing. If all goes well, relaxation replaces perfectionism.

'No' and 'Yes' in Life

When is it useful in life to say 'No'? When is it worth saying 'Yes'? And in what circumstances does 'Yes… And' look like it might be a good strategy?

What if a passing stranger asks you to jump off a bridge? 'No' would seem a valid response. In fact, unless you are at a bungee or diving event, you are most unlikely to be asked. And if it does happen, you will probably ask 'Why?' - assuming there's a good reason for the request - or ignore him entirely on the grounds that you see no purpose in getting involved with this stranger. Or you might say 'No'.

In general, it makes sense to say 'No' if by doing so you can avoid an outcome that you do not want. Jumping from a bridge presumably leads to unnecessary pain and unwanted disruption to your journey. So you make your decision and your opinion clear.

More plausibly, there may be requests at work to which it is wise to say 'No' on grounds of safety, psychological health

(too much overload), or because it conflicts with your moral sense. You might decide you won't lie to a client, refuse a reasonable request from a customer or work on a religious holiday. You might calculate risk: 'I don't fancy it. I could do it if I chose to, but I am deciding 'No' for me at the moment'. There may be no safety or moral question, it is your calculated or instinctive preference. You may be asked to exercise your 'No' when you are in a position of authority or expertise. It's your judgement that counts, and 'No' may be the best decision.

When is it good to say 'Yes'?

When might 'Yes' prove to be a good choice?

There are many simple situations when 'Yes' lets your questioner know you are complying with their request or confirming straightforward information.

When you're on the train and the inspector asks if she may see your ticket, it's wise to say 'Yes'. When you are asked if the museum is around the next corner, it's the hospitable answer.

You say 'Yes' whenever you are willing to agree with whatever strikes you as proper, appropriate or necessary.

When there are choices and you are offered an acceptable choice, 'Yes' is an easy (and not necessarily the worse for that) option. It's a valuable way of maintaining momentum until the time you're ready to add something, stop or do something else. When other people want you to join in or indicate support, without you needing to contribute much to the activity or instigate significant change, a 'Yes' can be most encouraging.

Lurking on websites, supporting football teams and nodding in agreement to streams of harmless nonsense in the pub are all gentle 'Yes's' that oil the wheels of our social lives. When

you have no control over what is going on, it makes little sense to offer anything other than a 'Yes'. King Canute legendarily wasted his time defying the tide. And once something has happened, the chances of it happening are 100%. As Byron Katie [21] puts it persuasively in 'Loving What Is', 'there's no point arguing with reality'.

Reaching for 'Yes... And'

When might it be attractive to reach for 'Yes... And', in words or in attitude?

'Yes... And' serves you well when you want to expand or develop a topic, for example in open discussions, teambuilding or brainstorming.

Any time you want a creation that is bigger or different from what you could have done yourself, you can 'Yes... And' with others.

It can be interesting to add an '... And' to a 'Yes' that you are already offering. 'I have to do this anyway and I can add something to it'. Maybe I am obliged to show my ticket to the train inspector and I could wish her a cheery good day as well, taking it incrementally beyond the usual routine.

'Yes... And'-ing is a developable skill. As you get better at 'Yes... And'-ing, you connect more closely with useful life-skills such as being more comfortable with uncertainty. The 'Yes' signs you up to another person's offer - an adventure that could lead anywhere. The '...And' places your hand too on the steering wheels for that adventure, and brings it into the realm of co-creation, so you enjoy a degree more influence.

Then the adventure includes more of your agency, creativity and input. Sure, you still don't know what's going to happen - uncertainty remains - yet you are managing it by choosing to

embrace this particular uncertainty and by contributing to what happens next.

When you do this, there's often a bonus for each party of whatever emerges from the joint activity that is richer and more interesting that what you would have done alone, or what would have occurred if you had simply said 'No' and nothing had happened.

In these activities we practice and experience responses which we don't always receive in our regular work. When we get a 'Yes' instead of the normal 'No', we are relieved of the need to justify ourselves.

When we are confident that we are not going to be forced straight onto the defensive, it is much easier to allow ideas to flow and be expressed.

In the game of 'Instant Ads' for example, there are two such mechanisms. It's a party game in which your group of 3-5 people takes two minutes to prepare a TV advertisement to present to the other party goers. Any of your team can suggest (in any order) a problem, a product that solves the problem, the brand name, a celebrity endorser and a line of a jingle. Every suggestion must be met with an enthusiastic Yes, and the first offer for each category is always accepted.

The two interesting mechanisms are these: first, as a player, you know that you are going to accept each offer, rather than refuse, debate or have to come up with something even better. Second, you know that each of your offers will be accepted.

I'm not proposing that we conduct all of our affairs in this way. I am suggesting that an occasional experience of 'Yes... And'-ing can be a powerful antidote to constant negativity. A switch in many contexts from 'No' or 'Yes, but' to 'Yes... And' is a revolution.

It's also a counter to other forms of insidious negativity such as argument for its own sake. Do you have colleagues who are in the grip of 'Yes, but'? They sound initially positive with that 'Yes', but within a fraction of a second, they have changed the direction of the story, redirecting it away from the intentions of the first person.

Hierarchies in education and the workplace can make 'Yes... And' switches more difficult to institute. There's a tendency within organisations to favour suggestions from the more powerful and higher up, which may have little to do with the merits of any offer. This may include rejecting suggestions from people simply because they are lowly.

An institutional preference for saying 'No' promotes the supposed safety of the status quo.

We can explore each of these attitudes in a range of activities and media, including drawing, movement and conversation.

A short story with 'Yes... And'

In this activity, the participants tell a story. How the story turns out doesn't matter - this is about practicing 'Yes... And'.

One player says the first line. The second player repeats the first line, then adds a second line. The next player (or Player A again, if you are doing it in pairs) repeats the second line and adds a third.

For example:

Player A: A man walked into a shop.
Player B: A man walked into a shop and grabbed a carton of milk.
Player A: He grabbed a carton of milk and looked at the ingredients.
Player B: He looked at the ingredients and spilled the milk on the floor.

Continue for a set number of lines, a set time, or until the players consider the story is complete.

You can take the essence of the game out with you into many arenas. For example, if during a conversation with a friend (or sibling or child) you echo a short phrase of theirs from time to time, you not only signal that you are listening carefully, you also slow down your side of the conversation and they will have the feeling that you have fractionally shifted the balance of the interaction in their favour.

Two more 'Yes... And' Activities

This activity relies on accurate listening and develops your skill of storytelling by using what you have heard.

In pairs, remember when you were younger and about to finish at your school or college. Where in the world was a place that you wanted to go, whether for a holiday or for work - any travel destination? Choose one that you can both subscribe to.

It doesn't matter whether you have been there or not. Imagine, though, that you took a trip there together. This is an exercise that combines imagination with 'Yes... And' practice. You meet again today and you reminisce. Remember the time you went to... wherever it was.

For example:

Player A: Remember the time we went to Nottingham, it was freezing!
Player B: Yes, and it was raining as well.
Player A: It was raining and you had that really big woolly coat on.
Player B: Yes, and I forgot my hat.
Player A: Not having your hat turned out to be an advantage when we went to the Robin Hood theme park.
Player B: Yes, I won that bow and arrow competition.

Player A: They gave you a lovely cup as a prize
Player B: Yes and I remember I kept that cup under my woolly coat to protect it from the rain.
As you'll have discovered from the activity above, imagining is easy. Imagine a garden gate. It's green. It's at the end of a path that leads from a door of a house. Imagining this is easier than getting out of your house and finding the exact location that you have imagined.

Visualising a scene is easier than enacting a scene: no physical effort is required. You could say that theatrical improvisations are all visualisations with added actions.

If here and now you visualise, your visualisation does not need to be about the 'Here and Now'. We can give our full attention to an event that happened long ago, to imagining scenarios that we would like to happen, or to our current feelings. Each of these has its uses.

Once you visualise a desired scenario, for example, it is easy from then to notice when elements of that scenario actually happen. You can see when your 'difficult' colleague is making a helpful contribution to the project. You may reconsider and decide that they are not so 'difficult' after all, then let go of that old description, and adapt to inviting them to be even more helpful next time.

'Decorating a room' is much like 'Remember our trip to...' pitched into an imaginary planning session. It's a 'Yes... And' conversation, except that instead of 'remembering', you plan together. For example, plan to decorate a room in the new house that you are going to be sharing.

It is easy to transfer this exercise directly into any real planning situation. Any time a colleague proposes part of a plan that strikes you as sensible, you say 'Yes', preferably adding either a detail to that part of the plan, or adding an adjacent element.

Getting comfortable with uncertainty

These activities - ‘Remember our trip to’ and ‘Decorating a room’ build a skill. While you have the practice conversations, you are in a low stress setting that takes you to a (relatively) easy edge of uncertainty. You don’t know what your partner will add until you hear it, and then it’s your turn to respond.

You’ll have a degree of skill at responding coherently and fluently in the made-up, nothing-at-stake situations, while increasing your comfort with the uncertainty. That skill level increases with practice.

Another way of looking at it is to say you are gaining familiarity at participating in an emergent, co-creative conversation.

Sometimes your exploration of creativity brings surprise and laughter. You’ll surprise yourself or your partner or a listener. It may be that saying the most obvious thing turns out to be the most fitting.

It is easy to say the obvious. It is difficult to be clever or brilliant - unless you happen to be clever or brilliant.

Humour from being obvious

Often humour emerges during an improvisation session thanks to… surprise.

You can surprise yourself and even more often you’ll surprise other people when you state the blindingly obvious. It turns out to be the best thing you could have said. British improviser Paul Merton is a master of saying the obvious. When you analyse his comment, it may not be particularly witty or clever; it was 'le mot juste' because it was calling out to be said. So, using that power of the obvious is an effective improvisation tactic. Away from comedy panel game

settings, the obvious remark may or may not be funny, but it is likely to be apposite.

The Merton method takes courage, as it involves committing yourself to what others are reluctant to say.

Saying the obvious may be counter-intuitive if we'd love to appear clever or funny, yet it works because it serves the story. It fits. And the bonus is that it is easy for us to say what is obvious to us. We gain fluency by not wasting time trying to think up something clever or special. This is why Keith Johnstone, improvisation guru and author of 'Impro' [22], tells participants in his exercises to 'be average'. There's no struggle or extra effort, especially as you cannot be better than you actually are.

In an improvisation class we set up a particular context, with its own rules and conventions. These are different from the rules and conventions in most offices, which are different again from a family eating a meal together.

One of our conventions in our workshops and courses is that whatever happens in impro class stays in impro class. Except that we can smuggle out our learning. One of the joys of this sort of work is recognizing how one context resembles another sufficiently to allow the transfer of your skill or resource.

A first step might be to reflect on how you participated in an activity or a game. Do you recognise a pattern in how you succeed in the game that might also serve you usefully in how you fare in other settings? And are there one or two other options that you might like to add or experiment with?

In the classes, we take care to establish an environment in which it is safe to take risks. When you succeed in taking a risk in class, you may be more willing to take a risk outside.

In simulating uncertainty and reflecting on how you fared, you capture useful ideas for your own circumstances and contexts.

One student wrote a poem and said, 'I was surprised how much I enjoyed doing it. I put a few linguistic tricks in there that pleased me. I realised if it was something I have done and enjoyed, then maybe I could do it a bit more than I am currently doing.'

I'm impressed by how often improvisers rediscover their creativity, whether it's by reminding themselves of their skills, getting a kick from the enjoyment of an activity such as writing a short poem or drawing a picture, or from the appreciation of an audience or collaborator for their contribution. In a class, it is clear how it is one thing to write your own stuff and keep it private, and quite another to risk sharing it.

‘Yes… And’ is for improv… and sometimes for life

Sometimes improvisers get overly enthusiastic about 'Yes… And' and suggest applying it to everything in life. That’s not what I’d recommend. As we have seen, there are many suitable occasions for saying 'No'. There are times to say a simple 'Yes'. There are also situations when 'Yes, but' is a good choice. All of these connecting phrases are common parts of our language for good reason and have their uses.

In a creative environment such as an improvisation workshop, participants are more likely to say 'Yes' when they know they have the option of saying 'No’. Exercising choice means taking responsibility and serves as rehearsal for team-work and leadership.

We make choices about what to say and what not to say; about caution and risk; about truth and concealment. In a safe space, the experience is primarily experience -

unburdened by extra freight. When we reflect, we are invited to notice useful aspects of what happened, so that we may test deliberately different choices. We increase our power, control and attention.

When we improvise stories, nobody knows and nobody cares whether or not you enjoy thunderstorms, ride horses or attend football matches, because we're not going to test you and check you later. It's a game.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

When does your sense of humour emerge naturally, without effort?

Next time you visualise something in the future, add a dozen more desirable features.

Notice how often you are saying 'Yes' or 'No'. Are there opportunities to switch the answer to your benefit?

5 Making success easier

Unless you are already enjoying an existence of unprecedented idleness (and luxury), there are probably thousands of possibilities of making your life easier. In truth, there will always be troubles and challenges to face. This chapter offers tips for discovering ease where it may appear difficult, so we can reduce excess effort.

Paradox of effort

As you start finding and thinking on your feet as an improviser, you encounter new games and activities which are designed to demand more and more of you as a participant. They test your responses to pressure, reveal how you handle the increasingly inevitable mistakes, and tune up your skills in team work.

Often with these activities, the harder you try, the more difficult they can appear – and that makes them excellent illustrators of the 'paradox of effort'. With less effort you grow more successful. The secret, then, is to treat them as if they are easy, and then they will be.

You might, for example, switch from thinking (and worrying) about your next move, to simply accepting the rhythm of a game, and allowing your body to respond more instinctively. The '1, 2, 3' Activity offers an opportunity for growing precisely this skill.

'1, 2, 3'

In Round One, two partners count to three, alternating:

Player A: One
Player B: Two
Player A: Three
Player B: One

Player A: Two
Player B: Three
Player A: One
And so forth...

In Round Two, they replace 'One' with a hand clap. In Round Three, they replace 'Two' with a tap of the foot. So the sequence is now Clap, Tap, Three. In Round Four, they replace ‘Three’ with a sound and gesture.

As a facilitator, you might pause the activity from time to time, to remind the pair that this is about rhythm and fluency, not effort.

In life, many activities, including driving, cooking and almost all sports include significant opportunities for rhythm, in which we can trust our bodies to let go of stressful cognitive efforts.

The Anti-Perfectionism League

Activities such as ‘1, 2, 3’ are structured to prompt mistakes. What happens when you make a mistake in this game?

Most participants carry on. A single mistake doesn’t have to stop the game. There is not enough at stake to demand stopping when it’s less than perfect. Some participants will laugh at a mistake - whether their own or their partner’s. Some will blame a partner, some blame themselves and some blame the facilitator for putting them in an error-fraught scenario.

Sometimes in life and in work we demand perfection. If you were piloting a passenger aircraft, running a nuclear power plant or operating on my kidney, perfection would be welcome. There are many situations where mistakes are hugely consequential; we don’t want them and it is important that people take them seriously.

In other settings there's a minimum level of competence that may be acceptable even though it falls a long way short of perfection. Most customer service falls into this category: much of the time it is good enough, though it is rarely a delight.

How perfect do we ourselves need to be? Well, it depends on the circumstances, and we can stop beating ourselves up when we don't need to be perfect. If I'm a bomb-defuser, I know the consequences, and I'll make fewer mistakes. I'll learn how to do it carefully, follow procedures, take precautions. I won't fear the bomb, I'll fear the explosion. I'll get into the appropriate emotional state to do my best. So I won't focus on mistakes, which would generate unhelpful emotions for the task, such as fear. I'll focus on getting it right, evincing useful emotions such as calm, and concentration. Now I am in the moment, focused on each step of the procedure, each new element that presents itself.

Are you perfect? Have you gone through life without ever making any mistakes? If you can answer 'Yes', then you are in for a potentially shattering shock when you do eventually stumble.

Let's assume that none of us thinks that we are perfect and that we all make mistakes from time to time, ranging from the trivial to calamitous. What we can explore with improvisation is our attitude to mistakes. What happens to you when you make a mistake? Do you have tendencies towards perfectionism? And, if so, what's a life-enhancing response for dealing with it?

In an improvisation class, we relish activities in which it is almost impossible not to make mistakes. They are designed for the very purpose of enabling people to screw up. For example, there are intricate counting and pointing games. If you miss a step in the sequence, there's a small consequence. That might be a restart or a minor penalty such as you having to change places with other players in the game.

The mistakes and penalties enhance the appeal, just as in computer games, where the challenge of getting it right adds to the addictive quality of reaching the next level.

When I ask people to notice what happened when they made the mistake, they say that they:

laugh about it
are annoyed with themselves
blame their partner in the game
blame me
carry on

In these games, there is little at stake. If you make a mistake, it's relatively easy to let it go and carry on. Because you value getting it right, you accept that there is a consequence - however trivial - for getting it wrong. And because the consequence is so trivial and results in at least as much fun as not making the mistake, the cost of the mistake hovers around zero. In effect, you are allowed to make mistakes. It's a training in being OK to make mistakes - at least in this activity.

A game in an improvisation class is plainly inconsequential; nobody minds which side of the room you are on or whether you say this or that. It's quite obviously 'only' a game. And there are many situations in life in which we overestimate the significance of mistakes, enhancing them disproportionately in our own minds.

For example, when you are teaching or giving a presentation that goes wrong - let's say you forgot one of your points - you later realise that your audience either didn't notice or didn't mind. The mistake remains invisible unless you choose to reveal it. Every job has its non-critical aspects, for which mistakes are not the end of the world.

When there is practically no penalty for a mistake, it is easier to admit to your own mistakes and to call out others'

mistakes without destroying your relationships. In those circumstances, it is much easier to rapidly improve standards.

One trap of perfectionism is that if you suspect you may be less than perfect, you may never get started at all. It's too risky. So perfectionism functions as a real inhibitor of creativity. Another trap is that the perfectionist is reluctant to admit to a mistake and so mistakes go unacknowledged - or worse, are covered up.

When we remove the fear of making mistakes, we are smoother and make fewer mistakes. We might productively wonder how to remove fear even in circumstances where mistakes are more consequential and therefore rightly discouraged.

If we are less harsh on ourselves when making a mistake, we can recover more quickly and deploy more energy into returning to the activity in a better state. This is the connection with resilience.

When you are willing to suspend your own judgement - even for a short while - you can have a go, then judge later. You get to take your time to decide whether or not your creation or efforts will go any further.

If someone else is making the judgements, you can decide how important their opinion or verdict may be in any given context. The games are training grounds on which you can safely play and practice, in preparation for your real-life applications. But please note that this is an invitation to 'Let Go' and 'Embrace Uncertainty', not to encourage failure where it is not welcome.

Do we learn more from success or from failure?

'We only ever learn from our failures.' That's a quote from James Dyson [23], the brilliant engineer and entrepreneur.

It's a common sentiment, representative of many others in the extensive failure literature. In a radio talk, Dyson gave the example of a Roman Bridge that has been standing for thousands of years. He said we'd only know how strong the bridge was if we stressed it to the point of collapse.

Now that strikes me as a very engineering view. Learning by 'testing to destruction' is a precise engineering-specific fraction of the learning available from that bridge. It's a perspective that neglects our appreciation that the bridge has succeeded (and provided learning) in many other ways: carrying people across it, as an example of aesthetic beauty, and even in engineering terms succeeding in staying up for that long.

Failure is always relative to context. Alchemy was always doomed to fail in its headline enterprise of turning lead into gold. But seen in the context of a playground for Isaac Newton (one of the great alchemists) it was apposite training for his observations that led to his discoveries of laws of physics and gravity.

I propose that there is minimal learning from failure. When people talk about learning from failure, I suspect that they are usually referring to the information about a corresponding success - if there's been one. Any 'learning value' resides overwhelmingly with the success.

This story provides a good example of what I mean. Until it stopped serving meals a few years ago, 'El Bulli' in Northern Spain was regularly voted the best restaurant in the world. Head chef Ferran Adria then opened a Food Research Institute and Archive. His archive contains all the recipes that they created. It includes the successes, which they served in the restaurant, and the failures, which never made it beyond the kitchen. All were meticulously noted.

Now if you were lucky enough to eat at El Bulli, and you could choose only from the recipes that worked or from those

that didn't, which would you pick? And if you wanted to open a great restaurant yourself or simply learn to cook, and you could equip yourself either with the El Bulli Success Stack or the Failure File, which would you take?

If you think we learn more from failure than success, then plainly you should take the Failure File. And that strikes me as odd, as (it seems to me) virtually all the learning is in the Success Stack. The Success Stack has everything you need to know about tasty recipes, and nothing in the Failure File would add to that: it could be safely burned (as no doubt were many of the ingredients).

Closer to home, I failed to write a book last year. My learning about writing books = zero. It turned out that I was too busy to write: other matters seemed more important. Everything I know about writing books, such as the value of a daily quota of words and the importance of meeting publishers' deadlines, I gleaned from the productive years when I actually wrote my books.

El Bulli happened to divide its archive according to success and failure. If there were corresponding document sets about writing books, flying aeroplanes, building comfortable homes or having happy relationships, I'd take the information about what works over what doesn't work - every time.

If you want to learn, it matters where you put your attention, and putting your attention on success will teach you a great deal more. The same is true in the pursuit of happiness.

So where does that leave us in relation to mistakes?

The mistakes myth

Have you heard the mistakes myth? It's in two parts. First this myth says we can't learn without mistakes; then it adds that we should embrace our mistakes. Well, up to a point. The first part is plain wrong - or, as one might call it, 'a

mistake'. It is possible to learn any process by following it correctly without mistakes.

Whether it's tying a shoelace, playing a sonata on the piano, or even assembling flat-pack shelving, first-time success is a theoretical possibility. You probably won't get it right first time, but you just might. And in order to do it a second time, you definitely need to accomplish it a first time. If it did happen to go right first time, and your memory was working well, you could be said to have learned how to do it - and would prove that to be the case by getting it right on each subsequent occasion.

Also, in attempting such tasks, even when you make a mistake as part of a process, most of those mistakes offer Useless Learning. If you hadn't made the mistake, you'd have been fine - and no less learn-ed.

To learn to do the task, you need to learn each bit of it, and making mistakes adds nothing to your knowledge of the accurate bits that comprise the entire task. You can learn about a boundary without crossing it. You don't need to crash a bike to ride one, break a leg to ski or have your business go bankrupt to be a successful entrepreneur. From any mistakes along the way, you'll learn only a particular thing not to do again.

Making mistakes

I was wondering why the mistakes myth is so prevalent - and it pops up like acne all over the place. I heard it, for instance, during a workshop at Stanford Design School, one of the world's leading business schools. They gave only one example - of a child learning to walk, through a series of stumbles. But stumbles are not mistakes.

In a process of trial and error, the errors give you feedback allowing you to make quick corrections to keep going with the bits that work. No mother would say 'my child made a

mistake today' if he had a small bump as a toddler; it's all part of the process in any environment in which learning is encouraged.

What you get most of the time in a learning environment such as a science lab is not mistakes or failures (unless you don't record your data, which is a mistake, or don't complete your project on time, which is a failure), but information or results.

Let's contrast a learning environment (where the focus is on learning or on experiment) with a professional environment - where the activity is expected to be executed to a high standard (for the clients). Would the proponents of the 'OK to make mistakes' myth be willing to subject themselves to a mistake-prone dentist with a drill to their mouth, a surgeon with a knife or a nurse with their drugs?

The value of a mistake is determined largely by its context. A driver making a mistake as a map reader may suffer inconvenience or frustration; or may gain an amusing story. A driver making a mistake as an avoider of cyclists or pedestrians could be facing a tragedy. It's possible with these topics to be confused by language. The opposite of failure is success: you cannot have the concept of one without the other. It's like light and dark, profit and loss, but that tells us nothing about the world, only about how language works.

So what's the opposite of 'mistake'? 'Getting it right'? In general, in most aspects of our lives, we get on with quotidian activities with a reasonable degree of competence, and 'not making mistakes' is so unremarkable that there's no single word for it, and it's easily neglected.

We tend to talk of success when something goes well... beyond expectation. What works fine and what works well are both worth exploring for learning: this is a key lesson of Solutions Focus, of Positive Psychology and of the Strengths movement.

Yet it's mistakes - the things you are supposed not to do, usually for a very good reason - that get such a good press. Why? And why does it matter? We like drama and stories, and mistakes are often remarkable and interesting, but this preference can skew our values and perceptions.

Here are three examples:

The Mistake that Turns Out Well

You make the mistake of sitting at the wrong table, you meet a wonderful person and have been with them ever since. A good consequence, but there's no learning about where to sit - and the right table could have worked out well too.

The Happy Accident - a surprise result

You fail to make the strong glue that you wanted, and you make a weak glue by mistake - yet you are astute enough to invent the Post-it note. Alexander Fleming notices that penicillin kills bacteria. He's reinforced his existing learning to stay alert, but he has not learned that it's a good idea to have a dirty laboratory - and it was the dirty laboratory which was the original mistake. These are stories about noticing what works, even in unexpected circumstances.

The Process of Elimination

When there are very few possible answers, you can arrive at the right answer by rejecting all the wrong ones. This raises you to the level of learning of pigeons in a maze, but most situations are more complex and interesting.

In improvisation circles you sometimes hear of the 'Failure Bow' (or even 'The Church of Fail') and are advised to embrace your mistakes. That's the second part of the Myth. Embracing mistakes may be fine in a workshop and even to some extent on a stage (where the fumbled action or the mis-

spoken word can turn into a happy accident), but it has limited application in life.

With embracing mistakes, the value is the de-value. It's about reducing the stakes, appreciating that in these contexts mistakes are pretty inconsequential - and so it makes sense to reduce the fear of mistakes and encourage 'having a go'.

That's the same reason why we can celebrate abandoning the tradition of beating schoolchildren for errors in class (which got mixed in with beating them for behavioural lapses). Punishment made no more sense than castigating scientists for experimenting or decrying nature for proceeding via evolution.

We are also told that ‘we learn from our mistakes in life’ - that they are somehow psychologically good for us, perhaps especially character-forming. We are encouraged to develop resilience, our skill or resource for bouncing back from mistakes, failures and disappointments.

Again, though, the learning is in the bounceback - the eventual success made all the more satisfying by the backdrop of the negative. It’s possible, too, that our difficulties bring into relief our resources of stoicism, endurance and plain coping. It's sweet to be reminded of these, but the only learning from the mistake is 'don't do that again' - which often times we already knew.

In a classic sports story [24], the tennis player Vitas Gerulaitas had lost 16 consecutive times to Jimmy Connors when they met again in the 1980 US Open final. Gerulaitas wins and announces, 'Nobody beats Vitas Gerulaitas 17 times in a row.' It’s a great comment. But losing to Connors had not taught him how to beat Connors. Beating him did. The research bears this out. 60% of first-set tennis winners go on to win the 2nd set (which in 3-set match means they win the match). If you have two evenly matched teams in any sport,

and one wins and the other loses, which knows more about winning? Success breeds success.

It is important to keep things in proportion, appropriate to the stakes. If the mistakes don't much matter, then don't give them excessive psychological weight. It's less stressful and thus good for your health to reduce needless perfectionism.

In a learning environment, treat mistakes lightly as a signal to have another go at succeeding or progressing. That's the one useful contribution of the 'Mistakes Movement' - it's why we invest in simulators.

If you make mistakes in your organisation, it's worth saying sorry, as that builds trust and reduces surplus fear of making mistakes. It's most unfortunate, for example, that politicians are under such intense scrutiny that they cannot safely admit to making mistakes, which leads to fewer adjustments to policy, even when needed. When a leader admits to mistakes, others are more inclined to accept their own.

Value feedback - your own and other's useful stories. That sets you up to make use of feedback for fast adaptation. It's a great improvisational and learning skill to notice how we are doing in relation to what we are aiming to do. Correct your course by spotting and quickly dealing with errors.

And learn from other people's mistakes. If they offer you a list of tempting, though ill-advised moves, use their generosity to avoid wasting your time and enduring the pain of going off track. Taking good advice will lead you more quickly to the Success Stack, so that you can learn from what your mentors ultimately got right.

The danger of myths about mistakes and failure is that they encourage mistakes in the wrong contexts. And they blind us to the infinitely greater learning from getting things right. So let's learn to learn from success.

For more about 'The Mistakes Myth' watch my 2014 TEDx talk at TEDx Russell Square, London [25]

Reflection questions: Easy does it

How might learning from a success be easy compared with learning from a failure?

What can you learn from noticing what other people do right? Are you attuned to happy accidents?

Where can you let go of perfectionism, so that you can try something new that might prove enjoyable?

6 Creativity

Let's meet our Muses and unleash our creativity. While we are all potentially creative and creativity can easily be easy, we need to set up favourable conditions for our creativity to flourish.

In which circumstances do you come up with your ideas?

Are you equipped to make records of what you are thinking?

Will your ideas be squashed or welcomed by the people you share them with?

If we want our improvisational abilities to develop, paying attention to context is crucial.

Meet your Muses

The Muses were Greek gods and goddesses. The classical idea was that people were not in themselves creative. But you could - in the right circumstances - be inspired by the God or Goddess visiting you. You would be the instrument of that Muse's creativity.

This idea is still around today, and you hear it when artists speak of waiting for inspiration to strike.

In the Romantic age, a new myth arose of the lone genius in the attic struggling with a manuscript or a painting. Here creativity was self-expression, with the key question, 'What have I got to say?' It's creativity as individual and internal.

This too remains a powerful concept of creativity. We talk as if creativity is inside us; we have to get it out there. What's more, it can be suppressed and some of us have more of it than others. At an extreme, you either have it or you don't. It

makes sense, in this view, for many or most to say, 'I'm not creative'. The Artist is special.

So it may surprise you to hear that the improvisational view is that creativity is neither inside us nor visited upon us. It is more usefully understood as an interactional phenomenon that can happen for us and that we can make happen - in the right circumstances. When you improvise (and at other times too), you become surprisingly creative with others. There is always hope, and you'll be more or less creative at different times and in different contexts.

Given that, let us re-cast Muses as the conditions that help us to be creative.

If you think about what has helped you express your creativity over the years, you'll recognise your own Muses.

They might include:

Trust - feeling that you will be accepted and comfortable in the group
Safety - feeling that you will not be criticised or penalised for your creative input
Reward - if there's something in it for me, I'll risk offering a creative contribution
A deadline - time limits that spark creativity (ask any journalist)
Setting time aside - a week in a remote cottage, 10 minutes during a busy day
How might you employ muses to your advantage? Well, getting to know your Muses is an antidote to beating yourself up for being uncreative. For example, if you know it takes a deadline to spur you to action, you will be more comfortable with a germinating phase during the period when you haven't yet written anything.

Alan Ayckbourn would reputedly write a play in a week. But he would do so only once a year. During the year building up

to that week of writing, he was nurturing ideas, getting himself ready. He might commit it to the page quickly, but it's equally fair to say he took a year to write a play.

Likewise, with a tight deadline, a journalist will easily - if reluctantly - write 1000 words in a day, and a designer will create an elaborate website. The time limit provides a constructively intense focus.

Setting time aside also means removing distractions. If you are easily distracted, either remove the possibility of distractions - by switching off all phones and computers, for example, or improve your resolve at ignoring them.

Some people prefer more elaborate methods, such as the Pomodoro Technique [26], setting up a series of fixed time periods for activity, punctuated by alarm bells and rests.

Even more a-Musing

There are many dimensions within which to seek and recognize your Muses.

You could consider:

Location
Food, drink and drugs
Fresh air
Exercise
Ritual
Collaboration

Where we are can be a Muse. Where do you find that you are most creative? Is it with your tomato timer in your kitchen or is it while you are sitting on a train with your notebook? Or perhaps in a café where there are other people around but they are not directly disturbing you - as Starbucks anticipated with their popularisation of the 'third space'

between office and home? Or is it while you are physically active, having a walk? Or relaxing in a shower?

The Romantic Poets (Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Co) were inspired by beauty and nature. And on occasion by opium.

Many of us get our creative juices flowing with coffee - or caffeine in other forms. Some prefer chocolate or fruit. Water and nuts supply good nutrition to the brain. Fresh air and exercise are often stimulating.

The Pomodoro Technique includes strong elements of ritual, and there's no reason why you shouldn't design and embed a personal ritual that serves your creativity. It may involve particular objects, such as a favourite pen or good quality paper - inspiring materials.

If we reject the myth of artist as lonesome individual, we can explore Muses of collaboration. It might suit you to have certain other people around to create with. Others legitimately find it easier to be creative alone, or with a book, or with the internet.

For many writers, confronting a blank page inhibits creativity. If so, finding a page that needs editing is a more sensible starting point. When I am writing, I often open a previously written document from my own notes, so I avoid feeling the pressure of starting from scratch. The raw material, in turn, usually comes from conferences I attend, where exciting sessions stimulate me to take plenty of notes.

Getting something started, however small the first steps may be, is a powerful antidote to feeling stuck.

Starting changes everything

If I ask you to write a story, it can be intimidating, partly because the task appears too wide. If you may write a story

about absolutely anything, there's a good chance that you'll feel overwhelmed with choice. It's impossible to know where to start.

It feels as if there is too little structure and too much freedom. In those circumstances, there are tactics for reducing the scope for yourself. Suppose you are told, 'Write a story, write whatever you like,' one tactic is to start doodling words. By taking a step, any step, you might find it looks very different from a moment earlier - the dreaded blank sheet of paper.

Taking a first step unlocks 'stuckness' and serves too as an antidote to perfectionism. The perfectionist will tend not to begin at all if they don't feel pretty certain that it will work out well. There's no risk of imperfection if you don't join in and have a go. The price is missing out on discovering what happens, which could turn out to be worthwhile.

With writing, there's less risk than may appear, because you always retain the easy options of editing to improve it, or throwing it away if it you are not satisfied. Given that you need to have a blank page to be scared by it, start by taking something vaguely similar that is already written - a previous email often suits - and adapt that.

As an ex-journalist I retain the habit of carrying a notebook with me, so that if a Muse does strike, even in the middle of the night, it is easy to take the next step of putting the idea onto paper. At your desk, mundane details such as a bright screen, comfortable keyboard, chairs at the right height, can all enhance your creativity.

If you're being asked to be creative in an office, say, that is not set up for your Muses, then you will struggle and it is up to you to change it. When I worked as a reporter in a newsroom, we were expected to write great stories at a shared desk with phones ringing all around, and with anyone entitled to interrupt you. Wise news editors allowed

journalists to work from home or retreat to a quiet room with no interruptions - it didn't matter to them, as long as the job was completed to the required standard and met the deadlines.

It is unlikely that you will share an identical set of Muses with your colleagues. It's worth finding out which Muses you expect to work most effectively for you and experiment with them to see how your creativity flourishes. Enlisting your Muses makes creativity easy.

Limericks

Creativity is either private or shared. Innovation - as the application of creativity - is most usefully considered as shared. In this activity you are invited to devise and share a limerick as a demonstration of confidence.

Equip pairs of participants with pen and paper. Remind everyone that a limerick is a five-line poem, in which lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme with each other, and lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other.

In each pair, player A offers the first line: perhaps 'There was a young man from Peru', to which player B adds a rhyming response: 'Who spent all his time at the zoo'. Player A creates a third line, 'He once saw a goat', and Player B the fourth, 'Standing next to a stoat.' And they create line 5 together, 'And recruited them both to his crew'.

Invite pairs to share their limericks. There is usually enjoyment in the collaborative creation and in the sharing in the wider group.

'The Story of Your Name'

Given that everyone is familiar with their own name, this group activity gently allows participants to tell a story. Any

storytelling is an exercise in creativity: we are selecting, shaping, editing and presenting information.

Tell the participants that each of us will share the story of his or her name.

Your name may consist of a first name, a middle name and a surname. Depending on your culture, it may be arranged differently. Perhaps you have changed your name for some reason.

Any of those elements can be interesting. During the activity, each person takes it in turn to state their name and share with the group something about their name.

You could share the history of how your name was chosen; say how you feel about your name - or your nickname; reveal what name you always wished you had - or recount what people have called you by mistake. Any aspect of your name is fine.

You might find that your choice of what to say about your name is influenced by what you hear from earlier people in your group - that's an example of spontaneous co-creation.

It is worth noticing how much you have already prepared what you are going to say and how much it turns out to be emergent based on how the conversation goes. There are no rights or wrongs about this. You share whatever you like in the story of your name.

No one can challenge or argue with what you say. You know the story of your name, which puts you in a position of absolute privilege (unless you are playing the game with a knowledgeable member of your family). Thus you have a secure base around which to improvise, if you choose.

As a listener, notice what makes a story interesting or compelling: is it the content, the way it's told, the emotional

connection, or something else? You can use memorable information produced by name games to connect to fellow players later in the day.

And, given the number of times you will introduce yourself during your career, you now have a possible strand of revealing conversation that's already tested with listeners.

'Gifts'

This activity brings out your creativity step by step. It works equally well with a group in a circle or with pairs.

Player A mimes passing an object or 'gift' to player B. The task for Player A is easy, as Player A does not need to know what she is passing; that's the job of Player B, who names the item, according to whatever he supposes it is. So that is easy too: there is no right or wrong. Whatever Player B imagines the object to be, that is what it is. Player A does not get to say, 'I wanted it to be an airplane, so how come you identified it as a mouse?' Once Player B has named the item, he mimes throwing it away over his shoulder.

For example:

Player A: 'Thank you James, thank you for the pen'
Player A throws away the pen and mimes passing something new to player B.
Player B: 'Thank you for this duck egg'
Once this routine is established, we gradually add layers of detail. As a next step, Player A passes a gift to Player B. Player B names it, and Player A adds an extra piece of information about the item.

For example:

Player B: 'Thank you for the penny'
Player A: 'You're welcome. You see it has Queen Victoria's head on it'.

The next level of detail is for players to adopt an emotion on receipt of a gift, allowing your recognition of the item to influence the emotion you display.

As fluency and confidence develops, add names into the dialogue to identify the two players in the activity: 'Thanks, Uncle David'.

Then encourage the players to increase their variety of accepting beyond 'Thank you'. We can accept more or less graciously while still naming the imaginary object. For example, 'I've been waiting hours for this receipt' or 'I hope you realise it is considered impolite to present an open pair of scissors in this region of Yorkshire'.

Sometimes a 'scene' develops spontaneously, which is a treat. But there is no pressure for that to happen, and the default is to dispose of the object after the three-part routine of 'Offer - Accept and name it - Add detail'.

When does a scene develop? Often it's when the next move is implied in the current offer. For example, if someone says, 'It burns very well', it's difficult to resist setting fire to it.

Short turn taking with simple and easy steps can rapidly lead to complex and satisfying exchanges. Even participants who consider themselves dull and unimaginative will amaze themselves with their effortless creativity.

Often, in real life, we know a pertinent detail that is worth adding as a short turn to a conversation; it adds value, keeps the wheels turning and allows us easily to make a contribution.

Physical flow

'Shapelines' is a game in which the players line up one behind the other to make a series of shapes - imagine poetry

in motion, as the shapes gradually shift, movement by deliberate movement.

You start with 3-5 people in a single-file line, and invite the player at the front to form a shape. The person at the back of the line moves to the front, copies that shape, then changes it by moving just one limb. The new person at the back now comes to the front and copies this second shape, then changes it by one limb. And so on.

We express our creativity in many forms. In this activity, each movement is a creative offer to the other members of your group. And an outsider sees how each group creates a different and unique series of shapes.

'Shapelines' is too fast-moving to get hung up on perfection. There is a brief moment of stillness before you move again. The task is to aim for swift accuracy, while sustaining the mobility and flow.

People exhibit different degrees of skill both in observing another's shape and in their physical mimicry, so remain tolerant to the limits of each player's ability.

While the movements may become elaborate, the sequence is simple, with clearly-specified short turn taking. It requires a big 'Yes' to adopt the position requested; then, in the single alteration of posture, a small '...And'.

With the focus as physical and non-cognitive, it generates a similar quality of feeling as hitting a tennis ball back and forth, or getting lost in playing a piece of music.

Note too that the shapes created by any line are emergent and unpredictable; they happen only as you make them, co-created in the moment. Each individual takes responsibility only for their own contributions: there is no leader. With this distributed leadership, everyone shares responsibility for how the line turns out.

This is the kind of activity that offers a clear experience of flow, rather than building a skill which transfers obviously beyond the workshop in a direct parallel with a specific challenge at work, although it is not beyond the wit of many workshop participants to find meaningful analogies.

Instead, it demonstrates a parallel at a group level of emergence and distributed leadership; concepts that are useful for leaders to grasp and understand as experiences as well as cognitive ideas.

Suspending judgment

'Walking from C to D' is a deceptively simple yet rich activity for illustrating our endless creativity. All the participants start at one end of a line that you suggest (but do not draw) by making two marks some 10 metres apart.

The task is to walk in turn individually from one mark to the other and not to repeat the exact way anybody else walks.

What this tells us about creativity is that there is much more variation in walks than the participants at the start thought would be possible. The extra resources of creativity are discovered moment by moment while the participants keep taking turns - not by planning or thinking about their walks in advance.

For example, Jack might aim to exactly copy Jim's walk, but there's inevitably a slight difference as no two people move identically. The frisson of soldiers' marching closely in step is partly that it looks so unnatural.

Creativity turns out to be easy: in this case it is generated simply by having a go, by agreeing to participate. Then it occurs in the moment.

Equally it is easy to reinforce our idea that we are not creative, either by choosing not to have a go, or by failing to

appreciate that our contribution was any different from another's, or by assessing that ours had no value. Those are habits of thought that stifle our creativity.

If we were interested in judging the walks - assessing which were most creative - it would be important to refrain from making premature judgements, so as not to inhibit the momentum of participants' keeping going.

You recall the 'disposability' concept. Every walk is different, and some moves from C to D could be considered more tedious or more interesting - who knows? You do something and if you like it, you like it (and have the opportunity to re-create it) and if you don't, you throw it away.

If we encourage a sense of experimenting, then we reduce the fear of making mistakes.

The more people that participate, the easier it is for each participant. In fact the only way to make a mistake is to sit immobile alongside and do nothing, which would show you had misunderstood the activity.

Even if we'd pick some of the walks as exhibits (for a future fashion show, perhaps), what happened during the activity is completely disposable in terms of the original walks. We never need them again; they are throwaway material.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

Which Muse will you enlist first? How easy can you make it?

What can you do with your computer to make it more likely that you will encounter circumstances to enable you to manifest your creativity?

What might happen if you were accompanied by your own Muses, like an entourage, wherever you go? Thanks to Dan Weinstein for this question [personal communication, 2015]

7 Telling Stories

As we saw in the previous chapter, a story offers a structure within which to exercise our creativity. Now we develop this theme, revealing how storytelling also provides opportunities for leadership and supporting others.

Making your partner look good

Suppose you spot an interesting thread starting to emerge in a meeting or a discussion about a project. Your improvisation instinct will be to give it gentle support.

Similarly in a workshop storytelling activity: if someone is willing to take the lead, you can appreciate that it may be productive to encourage them to direct the story, so you toss a nugget back to them to give them the opportunity to take it further.

This often results in a story flowing. The same applies to contributing to a discussion thread on a blog site. It's far more constructive to add encouraging support than snippy comments that lead to defensiveness, critical misunderstandings and a descent into banal name-calling.

Likewise with ideas produced during a work meeting. An idea may need a few short rounds of exploration and encouragement to gain sufficient robustness to move to the next stage. A 'Yes… And' atmosphere prevents new notions being strangled at birth, and makes a big difference to colleagues' willingness to come forward with their subsequent ideas.

Making your partner look good means supporting what's happening. We are offering a strong 'Yes' and a gentle '…And' to help them keep going.

In a jazz band, when one musician takes a solo, you don't expect the next musician to interrupt them and fight for the same space. They take turns, whether that's a long solo each, or quick turns calling and responding. They lead when it is time to lead and follow when it is time to follow.

To do that successfully, it pays to develop your sense of structure: how a story or a song or a project goes, how it may be shaped. You are contributing whether you offer a major new element or the vital connective tissue. As you get more skilled, what is obvious becomes more obvious.

As a group acquires greater skills, it appears as if each story is telling itself. Songs unfold, projects reveal their dynamic logic. Again, there is the paradox of effort; trying too hard to be clever or different damages the flow.

Whose story is it?

When a group tells a story, who is the leader?

Is it the person who speaks first? You could argue that they set the tone, named the characters or governed the setting. However, if the story is being told by participants each contributing a word at a time, then the first speaker has even less power than that.

Is it the person who says the 'big' words, the decisive choices that commit the story to go in this or that direction? Such a speaker clearly has a significant influence. Yet different people invariably lend significant words at different times during the story. And it's often not apparent during the process or even afterwards which are the 'significant' words for that story.

Or does the question pointing to a single leader not quite make sense? We are all leaders at times, and all followers at times, and telling stories in these improvisational ways offer examples of distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership requires distributed followership, which is the willingness of the team members to keep contributing what is needed to hold the project on track, to take responsibility for leading or supporting as necessary.

In such circumstances we observe self-organisation. Nobody is designated as the leader. The team works collaboratively, with all involved, usually with some agreed process of short turn taking.

As a participant, you take your turns or make your contributions, as do the others, so that you are co-creating emergently, bit by bit; you can't know what all the components are going to be or exactly how everything will be positioned until it happens.

In a story, you may well have a sense of a run of a few words. You embark on a well-known phrase or saying, or a routinely necessary part of a generic story. There's enjoyment in the recognition and ritual, but before it gets tedious or over-formulaic, someone spots the danger and adds novelty, which is a demonstration of leadership: knowing when to act and doing so decisively.

I used to argue that entertainment (and many elements of life!) had to be scripted, directed and rehearsed. All three of those conditions are the opposite of what occurs in these kinds of improvisational activities. There is no script, there is no leader and there is no drilling.

More accurately, there is no trial run of the specific creation, even if you practice telling stories to enhance your skills: each tale is different, in contrast with a script of a play that remains the same however often it may be performed.

You are doing it on the fly, building the bridge while you cross it, piloting the airplane while you build it. And it does take skill and talent to do something this extraordinary - and yet natural - together.

What are your requirements of colleagues for such activities?

It seems that in order to let go of control by telling others what to do or doing it all yourself, you need to trust and respect them. That in itself may not always be easy. Yet you only need trust them to reach minimum standards for the tasks in hand.

Then as a leader you may be rewarded by the bonus of colleagues using new skills and demonstrating a greater sense of responsibility to raise their standards elsewhere. As they get more reliable, so you can trust them further.

Leaders commit and stay with it

One way to demonstrate leadership is to commit, which means going out on a limb. You are trusting that you will be supported and you appreciate that your choice may succeed or fail.

This particular leadership role is important, and somebody needs to step in and take it. Otherwise, a story is enfeebled when the tellers hedge around with non-committal words that fail to advance the tale. These include 'Maybe', 'Very' (postponing the adjective) and 'Decided to' (rather than cutting to the chase of a word that enacts whatever was decided).

In improvisation performance circles, failure to commit is termed 'wimping', and good improvisers know wimping leads to weak scenes and flabby stories.

Once there is commitment, whether to a location, a character, an emotion or an action, there is scope for support. It is now possible for all the contributors to recognise the crucial parameters of this story that has started to be told. Now they stick with it, developing the detail and establishing the other germane elements.

It's a more satisfying story if justice is done to the elements introduced so far, rather than wrenching the story into a new, often annoyingly irrelevant dimension. Of course, this notion of exploring what's there does not mean a story cannot have many layers, as long as there is time to develop and resolve each of those additional elements.

How else can we improve our storytelling along with our improvisational skills? The following activities focus on making your stories more coherent and more compelling.

The Power of 'I'

There is a power in telling a story in the first person. It's only you who can share this story from that perspective, which gives the appearance of authenticity and means the story cannot easily be challenged. You also know enough about yourself to guarantee plenty of supporting detail. Crafting a story in the first person is often easier, less pressured and more likely to succeed.

In the 'Fish, Cable, Catapult' game, you tell a spontaneous story, incorporating three disparate words suggested by your audience. It looks harder than it is. In fact, it's easy to use a list to include the three words. If the three words you need to incorporate are X, Y and Z, then how about: 'Last night I dreamed about X, Y and Z'?

Once participants realise that the quest can be accomplished so simply, the richer challenge is to incorporate all three words while keeping the story interesting as it goes along and satisfying in its entirety.

Some people rapidly come up with a plan, only to realise later that they forgot to include the third word. A more effective tactic may be to rotate the three words in your mind until each finds a place in your story.

One approach is to start with ‘I’, as we know from the reasons above that 'I' offers advantages that serve us well. Your memory will connect you to at least one of the words you are offered. In one variation of this activity, the challenge is to make the story as real as possible, noticing the difference that makes to the quality of story or to the ease of the person telling it.

Another method is to start your story by setting a scene in which the three words might plausibly meet each other. ‘Crayon, Cloud, Artichoke… conjuring up a picnic.’

There are many approaches to constructing your particular story. All offer the possibility of emergent improvisation, co-creation in your head as you speak.

This then becomes a powerful skill for you as a leader and communicator. You’ll develop the confidence to craft stories on the spot, incorporating whatever circumstances arise.

If, for example, you are asked a question about how a particular organisational policy relates to an incident that has suddenly erupted as an emergency, you’ll have had experience at threading concepts together and at weaving a coherent pattern that accommodates these disparate bed-fellows.

Detail and advance

The best stories have a texture and dynamic. I learned this activity (under a slightly different title) from Kat Koppett and it teaches us how to enhance both those qualities.

Explain that Player A will assume total responsibility for the story that Player B will tell. This is a Keith Johnstone-style move to keep it easy, by removing any apparent pressure from Player B, the storyteller.

Player A will control the story with only two instructions; she can ask Player B either to 'advance' or to 'detail'.

'Advance' is used, when, as in a classic American movie, we want the action to keep on happening. There's no sticking around for descriptions of the characters or to take in the scenery. It's rapid fire and on to the next incident; plot, plot, plot.

'Detail', by contrast, nudges us towards a continental, probably French film, where the plot is peripheral, but you spend a lot of time getting to know the characters, the scenery, the texture, the emotion.

We may contend that outstanding stories proffer balance between these two. And so it is story-controller Person A's decision as to when Person B should make the story advance or should go into more detail about a particular element.

For example, let's say Person B is telling their story of today's journey to the meeting.

Player B: I woke up this morning, got out of the bed and…
Player A: Detail the bed
Player B: Small single bed in my mom's house
Player A: Advance
Player B: I went downstairs and realised I was late
Player A: Detail 'realised'
Player B: So I nervously looked at the clock and realised I had only 20 minutes to get to the class and so I ran out the door and jumped on the bus.
Player A: Detail the bus
Player B: Big blue seats and a lot of passengers on it
Player A: Advance
Player B: I jumped on the bus and took my seat just as it was pulling off and I was really lucky there was very little traffic on the way there and I actually got here with 10 minutes to spare so I grabbed a cup of coffee.

Player A: Detail

Player B: I went to the Starbucks and waited in line behind a large group of French tourists. They were a family of three kids who were running around the coffee store and the parents yelling at the kids.

Player A: Advance.

Player B: So I got in front of the line, ordered a small white coffee.

Whether recalling an incident from life or making stuff up, Player B usually finds it easy to tell their whole story, because the responsibility has shifted to their partner.

For Player A it's a nice insight into 'making your partner look good'. If they are fluent and interesting, keep them going; as the spark begins to waver, step in and re-direct them.

When you tell a story to people at home or at work, it's a useful skill to notice when your listeners want you to advance and when they would value more detail. If you allow your listeners to guide you, you become much more improvisational - responsive and adaptive.

When people are short of time, we serve them better by not being boring or giving them unnecessary information. Advancing and giving more detail when appropriate are sophisticated communication skills.

Improving presentations

Many people fear giving presentations. It's tough to talk in public as you become the sustained focus of everyone else's attention. The feeling that what you are saying is responsible for the learning or entertainment of that audience is a heavy burden. It's demanding and takes a great deal of skill to remain articulate, intelligent and on-topic.

How can we make it easier? There are many books on presentations. I recommend throwing away any that do not have the words 'Improvisation' and 'Story' in the index - or that don't have an index.

It will be easier when like a conjuror you impress by learning a few neat techniques and impressive tricks. What expert presenters (and magicians) do is a lot easier than it looks: and improvisation and stories are a route to confidence and success on the platform.

As you know, improvisation does not mean winging it or making it all up on the spot. It does mean interacting in a variety of ways with your audience and your topic, staying alert to what is happening in the room, and retaining a playful approach that allows you (and your audience) to enjoy the experience.

Remembering that the attention span of the average member of your audience is around 15 minutes, decide in advance that after say 10 minutes, you'll ask them if they have any questions or comments. You know you can deal with anything you already know about the topic. You'll have techniques for handling what you don't know. And you'll earn yourself breathing space before your next section.

Repeating or summarising a question gives you precious seconds of thinking time, as well as ensuring that everyone has heard what's being asked. It's easier for you, and adds value for the audience. It's an affirming 'Yes' of recognition for the questioner.

Using the words of the questioner provides scaffolding for your own words, your answer. Climbing with scaffolding is easy in comparison to scaling the sheer face of a building. Even structures which may appear at first to add a layer of difficulty, such as people calling out random words at you that you have to incorporate, paradoxically make it easier. That's the magician effect.

You are allocated time to script most workplace presentations, usually with you deciding in advance the majority of what you are going to say. You are generally obliged to include key points, maintain a particular logic and reach a certain conclusion, all of which is clearly important. Yet retaining the possibility of the impromptu, with the promise of interaction, can be more rewarding for the audience and more interesting for you.

If you are handed a one-way presentation, how best can you turn it into a two-way or multi-way presentation so that it is easier? As I prefer facilitating workshops and trainings for a living, rather than conventional platform speaking, I look for those opportunities. Sustaining a talk for 10 minutes or more is quite a stretch, especially if you disallow audience interaction.

In a successful run in professional theatre, actors deliver the same script eight times a week for six months. A rock band on tour may play the same set night after night. It could easily be tedious for them, and any lack of freshness is dangerously apparent to the audience.

Outstanding performers create interest through the interactions being different between them and another actor (or musician), between the actors and the audience. They vary the pace, the intonations, and their physical positions.

These and dozens of other significant variations produce freshness. That is their improvisation, even though they are always delivering the same script. It is possible, and sometimes professionally necessary, to detect the space and freedom within a given structure.

Likewise, you can treat what life throws at you as useful gifts or offers to be greeted profitably in many circumstances with a ‘Yes… And’ attitude.

For further practice at telling stories that reveal you as a creative, dynamic and compelling leader, have a play with the following activities.

Consider a semi-prepared slideshow presentation. With the help of a colleague, you make your presentation with a first slide that you have prepared. Your colleague puts in a second slide, a picture which you do not see until you give the presentation, when you talk spontaneously about it. And so it continues, alternating between prepared and spontaneous. You have a safety mechanism alongside a spontaneous piece that prompts you to think quickly.

In the 'Powerpoint Karaoke' exercise, slides appear and you present them. In one version, you speak for as long as you wish with each slide. In another more Pechakucha-style version, you have a fixed length for each slide before the next one appears.

These practices release us from the tyranny of speakers' notes on a screen masquerading as a presentation. What count are your stories and your creative personality.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

When can you offer support to those who are leading around you?

8 Shaping ideas together

What if creativity was seen as collaborative rather than individual and together we set up conditions in which creativity flourishes?

Emergence and self-organising

A wonderful phrase in a child's school report is 'plays well with others'. It indicates that the child is sociable, friendly and manages the robust give-and-take of classroom or playground negotiations. Such children are seen as easy to get along with.

I'm not sure how often recruiters for organisations ask whether the candidate plays well with others. Somehow, work-y qualities supplant playful in our assessments of professionalism.

Yet every organisation is a social system, and playing well with others is at the heart of successful teamwork, engagement and innovation. As a leader, if you have the social skills to read others well, you can discern a colleague's qualities. By abstracting those qualities from the evidence in conversations, stories and activities, you'll be more adept in assigning projects and roles to suit the skills and strengths of your people.

All of our great modern organisations and institutions are bigger than any one person could build. I'm proposing here that the fundamental unit of creativity is turn taking. And the easy way to get turn-taking processes to function effectively is by taking short turns. Long turns, when one person carries the project alone for a considerable time or distance, are also important. We observe them frequently not only in heroic leadership efforts in organisations, but also in improv theatre and jazz music. Still, the rhythm remains back and forth.

Many business structures follow this pattern. Interviews are question and answer. Meetings take turns around the table. One-way presentations are exceptions.

A study of improvisation would lead you to expect this. If improvisation is making use of what's there, we'll favour the larger resource pool that more people represent, at least as long as we have effective methods of harvesting the range of contributions. We'll particularly want to make use of the more successful offers, which places value on our ability to spot successes.

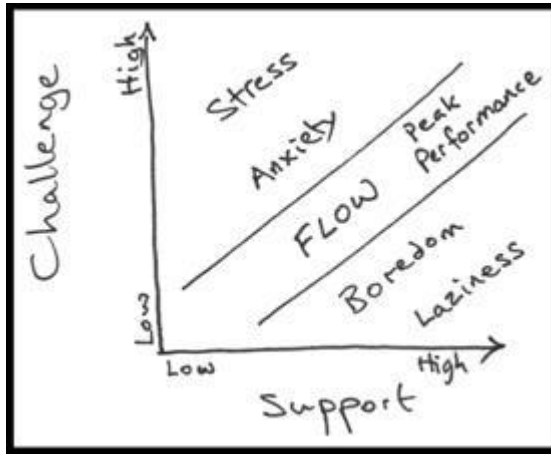
And the wise leader is always developing potential, allowing people to flourish by using their skills, recognising and acknowledging when they do well.

It would be easy to improve the quality of many meetings by paying closer attention to rules of turn taking: making sure everyone has a turn, encouraging shorter turns, allowing people to pass when it is their turn.

When we play well together, we experience flow.

Csikszentmihalyi and flow

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is probably best known for researching and popularising the concept of 'Flow' [27].



On the x axis, we have the degree of support (or sometimes skill), rising from low to high; on the y axis, the degree of the challenge that you face. Where support and challenge are more or less matched, we have a channel of flow. There we relish excitement, adventure and stretch; and in an organisational setting, we expect innovation and achievement.

If the degree of support is high, but the challenge is too easy - let's say you've been doing the same routine job for many years - you may grow bored and disengaged. Conversely, if you're being pushed to exceed all previous targets, while under-resourced and poorly supported or lacking the necessary skills, then you are likely to fail. You also have a recipe for stress.

High stress is damaging for health; the experience of flow is good for health. Flow feels good and produces physical and chemical effects on the body with endorphins and energy. Athletes call it 'being in the zone'; your activity seems effortless, easy and elegant.

The model makes it easy to tell what action to take if you want to increase your prospects of flow. Increase or reduce the level of challenge, or increase or reduce the level of support. Suppose at work you are stressed by a situation or

by too much exposure to a particular individual, then seek more support from colleagues. The key is to recognise what is going on and then take action to get to a better place of flow.

It's relatively easy to combat stress by learning new skills or seeking more support; get training or schedule a rest. It's also often possible to alter the level of challenge; by negotiating the tasks you are set or lowering the level of ambition. Now that may not be so easy to execute in some circumstances, but your intention will be clear.

Equally, a manager may be well placed to notice how her reports are faring, and find it relatively easy to adjust a schedule or allocate training or support, to reduce the work load, a quick remedy to avoid longer-lasting burnout, absenteeism, resentment and need for replacements. Or, if a colleague is under-stretched, she'll increase the challenge, institute a new project, offer more responsibility or reduce the amount of assistance.

The model might also persuade you to reduce damaging self-judgement. Rather than imagining yourself to be poor at a task, or accepting boredom as your natural lot, you recognise your position on the graph and make the necessary adjustments.

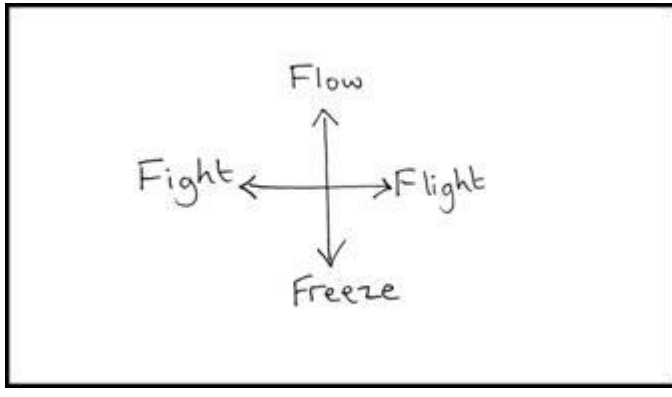
There's a sustained critique of Csikszentmihalyi in Slingerland's book 'Trying Not to Try' [28], suggesting that Csikszentmihalyi missed the significance of social dimensions. If you follow the improvisational routes to flow, our emphasis on interactions will automatically take care of that. In a workshop, almost all activities are social activities. Thus you'll get a strong sense of the interactional in all of your experiences of flow.

Fight or flight, freeze or flow

When we face a new challenge, we have two visceral responses: fight or flight. These are instinctive, the product of evolution, allowing our survival instincts to cut in, with flight representing a swift escape from the sabre-tooth tiger. We know we're not going to win, so we run away. Or if you are suddenly attacked, you may instinctively fight. It's automatic.

While there are few sabre-tooth tigers in my stretch of London, the behaviour is hardwired into us by evolution and kicks in as responses even to lesser threats. It takes the system a while to recover from these adrenaline shots, which is why much modern life, with constant stimulus and too little opportunity to do all that's needed physically to regain equilibrium, can be so damagingly stressful.

In a model that offers possibilities beyond Fight or Flight, we can add Freeze and Flow as other potential responses to a stimulus or offer.



With Freeze, you are rooted to the spot. In many cases this is a poor strategy unless you become invisible. Deer and other animals do successfully use stillness or camouflage to hide, or rely on their lack of aggression to neutralise attacking intent.

In other contexts, stillness indicates high status. This makes it a good, confident stance for a presenter, preferable to nervous fidgeting.

My colleague Christian Lang points out that martial arts such as aikido can be associated with both flow and fight responses. [personal communication, 2015] You fight by means of flow, combining your opponent's energy with your own, a very neat improvisational use of immediate resources.

Flow is the improvisational response. You take on the circumstance for what it's worth and adapt and deal with that in the moment as it emerges and as it evolves.

Finding value

'What I like about your idea' is a pairs conversation activity that I learned from Sue Walden. The dialogue follows this structure.

Player A proposes something to start a conversation about a topic given by the facilitator; let's say it's arranging an office party.

So Player A begins, 'Let's hold the party away from the office.' Player A and Player B then alternate, each using the expressions, 'What I like about your idea is.... and we could ...'

This means that they will each find value in the other's suggestion, then add another element to what's happening.

For example, Player B continues, 'What I like about your idea is that will allow us to take advantage of the lovely weather. And we could go to a park.'

Player A: 'What I like about your idea is that we'll have plenty of grass. And we could hire deck chairs.'

Player B: 'What I like about your idea is that we'll all have something comfortable to sit on. And we could bring a picnic'

And so on, back-and-forth.

What I like about this activity is that most people find it tremendously energising. The conversations take off because you are always feeding off one another's ideas. It's constructive, based on this short turn taking.

And I'm amused that almost every time I see this activity in a workshop, one of the participants will direct our attention to the times we couldn't possibly use this format in real work settings. They suppose either that they'll hear an idea that they could never agree with or that they'll be drawn into spending hours talking about ideas they'll never be in a position to use.

Leaving aside any discussion of the low expectations of their colleagues that they appear to harbour, I explain that the format is not recommended for every single conversation in every situation.

There is a difference between drilling a skill in order to experience a concept, and deciding when to apply that skill (or exact form of words) in another set of circumstances. If you apply the concept of explicitly liking (for a stated reason) a colleague's idea, say once a day as a leader in an organisation, you may find your relationships and results transformed.

In the activity we get the experience of a partner stating what they like about your idea. For most participants, this feels positive, a validation.

You know from the reply that your offer has been heard, and it can seem like a double validation, because they are also building on your idea. Sometimes there's an element of surprise, when the value your partner finds in your idea is

not the first value that you would have selected. Now this shifts your own ideas into slightly different perspectives.

When listening, it's your task to find the value. It may prove easy, obvious or highly creative. To get competent at this skill you must closely consider the offers your partner makes.

The particular elegance of this conversational structure is that you do not have to accept everything your partner proposes. You get to be selective. It's a tool for accepting what appeals and not necessarily accepting the rest.

This structure offers the discipline of making only a brief contribution in each turn, before it is your partner's turn again. This short turn taking makes it much easier to co-construct and it releases any pressure to force your creativity.

In cultures of suppressed ideas, this activity - or better still, its inclusion in more conversations in organisations - serves as a bridge between flat-out rejection of ideas and the overwhelm of accepting every scrappy suggestion that comes along.

In organisations where people come up with an idea and are immediately told 'No' or where their ideas are ignored, creative people (which can be any one of us, given the right conditions) will suppress their next idea or take it elsewhere.

This is a loss not only to the individual, but also to the organisation. If new ideas fail to reach expression, then the value in those ideas is lost, given no chance to emerge or be assessed. These organisations will stagnate and the most creative people will be first to disengage.

Recognise endings

When you are creating something new, such as a story, the ending has never before been decided. Whether in a project, a meeting or a story, it's up to you to recognise, discover or

manufacture an ending. Otherwise it will drift beyond its merits or simply go on forever, neither of which is desirable.

I encourage you to mark endings and invoke the practice of 'disposability'.

When your conversation ends, acknowledge it. That includes noticing when something has gone beyond a point of being worth continuing. If a story or an event grows lifeless or uninspiring, stop it, throw it away and move on to something else.

Not every occasion (and certainly not every improvisation) produces material of merit, and not every activity generates a flow state.

There's a difference between stopping a story with a flat 'No', which blocks it, and reaching an end through a 'Yes… And'-ing, turn-taking collaborative process, in which each story ingredient is fully realised and integrated into a satisfying or surprising whole, and is ended because it is timely or complete.

The 'Detail and Advance' activity previously described will build your skills of what to develop and what to leave, and gives you practice in sensing the shape, including the closing, of a story.

Stop

Improvisation activities often have a flavour of speed and fun. It's as if we are suddenly aboard a white-water raft, paddling furiously to keep between the rocks, racing down the rapids. Sensations are heightened, and there's often a lot of laughter as tension is released with every moment of success or failure as we hurtle through the unknown.

There's an addictive quality to this type of experience, and it's what many people most associate with improvisation. But

speed is not always of the essence. Improvisation is more about choice, about using each present moment to decide how to respond now. It is equally characteristic of improvisation to allow ourselves time to select a smart next move, whatever that next move might be.

This quality of alertness to the moment of movement is the crux of the 'Alexander Names' game, so called because it uses a core concept from the Alexander Technique, named after its devisor F.M Alexander [29]

> ***F. M Alexander***
>
> *F.M Alexander was an Australian actor whose work was at risk when he lost his voice giving Shakespeare recitals.*
>
> *He spent years studying himself in a mirror, which is apparently what actors do. And he worked out that he lost his voice through a habit of stiffening his neck, which constricted his breathing and vocal apparatus.*
>
> *He re-taught himself how to stop stiffening his neck and instead allow his neck and back to be free and flexible. He taught other people too, in a method that uses the light hands-on touches of a teacher to enable students to rethink and recalibrate their movement.*

The foundational instruction you give yourself in Alexander Technique is 'Stop'.

This core concept of 'Stop' provides a moment to inhibit our habitual response to a stimulus, and instead make a conscious decision. By stopping, we move more freely.

In this activity, a group forms a circle, and for each player - when it is their turn - the aim is to take somebody else's place in the circle by walking across the circle and standing in the gap created when that next player walks across the circle.

It begins with Player A calling the name of Player B (who it turns out is named Brenda). Player A calls 'Brenda', with the aim of taking Brenda's place across the circle, but is not permitted to move until Brenda has called another player's name.

Once Brenda has called a name, she may not move until her nominee has called a name. And so forth.

What happens is that players feel a huge stimulus to move as soon as they call a name. The skill is to stop and resist (or inhibit) that impetus until the next name has been called. You move when and only when the person whose place you want has called the next name.

This is another valuable skill to deploy in many life settings. If you tend to be a touch impulsive, the second of Stop will pay dividends by giving you the opportunity to decide whether or not to go with that impulse.

More generally, it is better for you to determine when to act than to be at the bidding of whomever or whatever happens to call on you at any given moment.

When you are collaborating or negotiating, it's a major strength to be confidently able to choose the most effective times for making your contributions.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

Can you improve the quality of your meetings by paying closer attention to rules of turn-taking: making sure everyone has a turn, encouraging shorter turns, allowing people to pass when it is their turn?

Where can you reduce stress by increasing support or reducing the level of challenge?

What do you recognize that is about to end?

How will your colleagues know that you play well with others?

9 Games and beyond

There is more to games than merely playing them, valuable though that is in itself. In this chapter we look beyond games for their own sake and towards their lessons for life - in questioning rules we apply to ourselves, connecting us to a more resourceful way of being and using them to solve pressing problems.

Breaking rules

We play an activity in which you move around a room, pointing to objects and naming them whatever you like. You might expect it to be easy to name things whatever you like. Yet many participants struggle, perhaps because there is too much freedom. Improvisation is always freedom within a structure.

The tighter the structure, the less choice you have. At an extreme - in a counting exercise, for example - you might be required to say a particular number. No problem at all, as long as you get the timing right.

But when offered the freedom to name an object anything at all, the choice can become inhibiting. If the structure invites you to 'name anything', the freedom is so wide that it might induce stress: 'What, anything?', 'Where do I start?'

It seems to me that to reduce the difficulty, we quickly apply rules, to narrow the structure to a more comfortable level. These will be more or less useful rules. And the rules we choose in the game may indicate the kinds of rules we are prone to follow in life. One aim might be to identify and keep those rules that make matters easy, but not at the expense of limiting our freedom to enjoy or more fully experience all the aspects of life we wish.

I asked a set of students to identify the rules that they were applying to themselves in the activity.

Student: 'I tried not to do sequential lists, like cat, dog, canary…'

Often when we realise that we are listing sequentially, we feel it is somehow wrong - too dull or too obvious - and we aim to extricate ourselves. Suddenly it is not so easy, because we are searching for an inspiration, a word different from any that our mind is producing for us at that moment. Trying to be more creative increases the pressure.

Student: 'I shouldn't repeat the same thing twice'

It's easy to repeat, but we suspect it's too easy.

Student: 'I won't call the thing by its real name'

It turns out that everyone is applying this rule to themselves during the game. One student insists I gave precisely such an instruction, and it took a replay of the tape to convince him that this was a rule he was imposing on himself. You are looking at a table, and you are allowed within the rules of this game to say, 'table'. It's an easy word to say because that is the word your brain is generating. Any other word is going to take more effort.

Student: 'I can't call it anything rude'

We obey rules of social acceptability, which may be prudent, particularly if we don't know the other players well enough to risk fruitier language. Also we fear the consequences if we are pointing at someone and calling them something rude; although it's clearly part of a game, the game is occurring within a life, and those around us might take it badly.

The game is followed by small groups talking about what rules they are applying in life or in work, analogous to the

self-imposed rules within the game, that have been previously unexpressed and that are worth checking. Are these valid rules in your life or in your work? When a rule is worn out or historical, you may decide you no longer need it. Somebody tells you what to do, but their authority doesn't apply. Or you are applying an outdated restriction to yourself and would have more fun or learning or success if you didn't.

We want to discover and keep those rules that furnish us with success. With an improvisational approach, we have a go and generate all sorts of results. We spot the successes, then we build on those with further 'Yes… And'–ing, either instantly or by re-application when next needed.

Solutions Focus for sustainable change

Steve DeShazer and his partner, Insoo Kim Berg, developed Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) [30].

In both its therapeutic and later applications in counselling, coaching and organisational team work, Solution Focus (SF) is an approach to change that turns out to be surprisingly consistent with improvisation.

It's an interactional model, with much to offer in its theoretical base and pragmatic approach to anyone wanting methods of making progress in a complex, fast-changing environment.

The principles are described in my book 'The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE' [31].

One of the six principles is 'Make use of what's there' which is a pretty succinct encompassing of improvisation. An SF consultant or coach is encouraged to work with whatever the client presents, rather than go into a situation with a predetermined theory of how they are going to change.

They look out for times when resources were well used and when results were better. For these purposes, it doesn't matter if the improvement was a consequence of a deliberate tactical move or was simply a happy accident.

A better result is studied as a positive difference, in comparison to the poorer outcome in similar circumstances. In Gregory Bateson's terms, 'the difference that made the difference' can then be put to good use.

So, like an improviser, the SF practitioner actively influences a complex situation and is OK with not knowing the outcome; in a context always of paying close attention to what results are wanted.

An SF practitioner has to be a careful listener, developing the conversation by using what the client presents. In the interaction, she focuses on the here and now. There is no digging for hidden meanings or search for 'what's *really* going on' as if that were different from 'what's going on'. As in an improvisation scene, at its purest all that there is to work with is what is made manifest. It all appears on the surface.

We know this is true for an improvisation scene, because it is produced step by step as the players go along. The scene is the scene, so there is no temptation to suppose that there was any part of that scene before or after the scene. If we are psychologists, we might wonder why a player made a particular offer, but that tells us nothing more about the scene as a scene.

Staying on the surface makes SF practitioners masters of the obvious. Rather than producing clever explanations for their clients, they dare to be dull, sticking to a conversation of descriptions, of details of day-to-day life.

SF practitioners sometimes feel surprised, impressed or scared by the rapid speed at which their work proceeds. They

need to relish this unpredictability as they co-construct with their clients.

The tools of SF include 'Small actions', which chimes strongly with short turn taking. When it is your turn as a coach or therapist, it is probably good practice to restrict yourself to asking one question or making one comment, interweaved with one from the client. You see where that takes you, and then make your next contribution when it's your turn again. As Steve de Shazer put it, 'You don't know what question you asked until you hear the answer you get.'

I suspect that masters of improvisation, of SF and indeed any other advanced skill are experts of contexts, of the particular and global needs of their disciplines. For example, both improvisers and SF coaches develop an eye for the overall shape, whether of an emerging scene or conversation.

Masterful practitioners also nurture their skill of keeping it as simple as possible, appreciating how simplicity (exemplified in such practices as short turn taking and a preference for what's obvious) produces satisfying results, whilst forcing more complication tends to ruin the shape of the work.

This means that in activities, whether in workshops or professional practice, they know when to stop. They have a sense of the arc needed for a coaching conversation. In a story, a good improviser keeps the borders of the story intact, with a sense of what to include and what to exclude, what fits 'the world of the story'.

The same holds for a brand or a product: it comes with implications. Consumers develop a good sense of 'fit'.

Both SF and improvisation deal in a world of possibilities, exploring 'What if…?'. The concept of 'Idea Space' is more useful than 'Truth'. We are more in the realms of art than

science; creativity rather than guarantees. There's also more co-operation than competition.

The value of co-construction is in the prospect of ending up with a better result than any individual party would achieve alone. Improvisation grows the co-construction skills crucial for coaches, therapists and leaders, such as listening, staying present and responding with discretion to each immediate offer.

The co-construction of an improv scene closely parallels that of a coaching or therapy conversation. Each contains turn taking and small steps. They benefit from full use of each step, usually before moving onto the next, or at least by reincorporation later. They share a search for solutions such as a well-told story in an improvisation or the co-creation of a new way of dealing with life's challenges in the coaching conversation.

While the construction is taking place, all the players have to behave and speak in 'Possibility Land', where possibilities remain open until whatever happens has happened.

These are interactions, and when they are skillfully executed, an on-stage improv scene looks like telepathy. It's an illusion, because the player cannot have any 'real' idea of what's going on in other people's heads. All the signals are readily available to the senses.

And, of course, even if you could know what was in somebody else's head (or written on their scripts), to improvise successfully you do not need to know.

Affirming statements and compliments play a significant role in SF. An improvisation-style 'Yes' can be experienced as an unqualified Affirm, particularly if it is followed with a silence or an '… And'. It will be diminished by a 'But'.

Improving teamwork

What conditions enable teams to work well? What helps you to be part of a team and to make a valuable contribution?

One important condition is that you do not feel that everything you do is judged critically the moment you do it. It is preferable to feel supported than overtly judged. We might privately all be making judgments all the way along - some of us can't help it - but in the creative phases we are not invited to share those judgments too early.

When we suspend judging, we step more completely into a process, improving our chances of enjoying it, of losing self-consciousness and getting into that flow state.

With no judgment, everything you do is fine. Let's be more precise about that. In an activity such as 'I Am A Tree', in which three players construct a tableau of a scene, you *can* do something wrong. For example being the fourth person in the scene where only three people are called for would be a mistake. It's that everything that you do *within* the scene is all right.

Your offers within the structure are welcomed. You are invited to have a go. In 'I am a tree' there will be no three-beat scene unless three people come in and do it, so there must be a persuasive invitation to participate. And at the same time, there is a choice: you don't have to join in. It's fine to stand back, especially if you notice that others are flying in. Then, when the moment arrives that you are more needed, you are poised to enter. You assess when to contribute as well as what to contribute.

If everyone jumps in at once at the beginning, it's crowded and chaotic. When I watch improvisational theater, chaotic scenes with too many ideas fighting for space are frustrating. Satisfying scenes are structured with more ideas (or layers or variations) added with exquisite timing.

For the team player, some suggestions are more inspiring than others. Some make you smile and respond. Others don't. As a leader, facilitator or contributor, your skill multiplies when you notice which of your suggestions bring pleasure or joy to others.

Keith Johnstone spends time in his workshops exploring what inspires a partner or an audience. At the extreme, he has people perform a scene and if the audience doesn't like it at any point, they signal and it's the responsibility of the teammates to drag that person off the stage. As the performer is removed, they must shout, 'But I am a good improviser!'

This awareness of what others are doing and of the shape of an activity or project is also part of being here and now and being in the moment. Along with your focus, you retain peripheral awareness of what else is around. If someone is taking photographs or if there's an intrusion, we respond and react to that.

There are thousands of potential alerts that will legitimately flag up in our peripheral attention. If they become strong enough, the signals cross the threshold to call you out. If you get completely and utterly absorbed, then you are vulnerable to the outside world.

We have a choice of where to send our attention. In improvisational settings, it's attractive to bring our attention to the focal point from which we gain the pleasure and the joy of flow, but it comes at the price of whatever we are not lending our attention to.

Conversely, if we are always paying attention to the next shiny item on the horizon, then we never get fully immersed in any activity. There is a cost to each end of the continuum and anywhere along it. It's tempting to label 'Sparkly Thing Syndrome' as the enemy of serious purpose. I wonder, though, if the key skill is giving the appropriate amount of

attention. It could be that Attention Deficit Disorder is a triangulation of poorly-presented information, learners untrained at giving focused attention and an overload of competing sparkly things.

For teams, a useful question is, ‘How can we ensure we keep enough of our attention on each other?’

Organisations function more effectively when members can easily signal, 'Yes, I am OK with this' or 'I am not.' In voluntary organisations (and in Open Space conferences too), people always have that choice by withdrawing their presence or engagement, but it makes sense to have signals that get noticed before conditions reach extremes.

There is already a crisis of engagement in many organisations. As today’s students enter the professional job market, the most talented are less likely to select old-fashioned organisations where they will be told exactly what to do and how to do it. They are going to contribute where they want to.

If you want to know the future of paid organisations, look at today’s volunteer organisations. See where people choose to contribute, what excites them to join in, who they will cluster with and what projects they choose to support.

Resilience as a resource

When people choose to leave a project or process, it does not have to be a definitive, permanent exit. Often it’s important to come back. What are the structures for re-admission? What personal qualities help us to return in a healthy state?

There’s a game I learned from Therese Steiner in which participants are asked to make a drawing for a minute or so. They then swap drawings with a partner and are instructed to spoil the other person’s picture.

I hear groans and murmurs of disbelief, because it's almost taboo to criticise let alone spoil other people's work. Here, though, with permission granted, they soon discover that it's quite creative being destructive.

When they return the drawings, the original owners no longer have what they intended; nonetheless it's back, with an invitation to make something new from it.

It turns out to be not so bad. Spoiling is in the eyes of the beholder. It's possible to know that people set out to spoil what you do without you accepting that the product is spoiled. Instead, you treat the item as fascinating, and the task as a new challenge.

Unexpectedly, you may create a drawing more interesting, more complex than your original effort. And you have received unintended assistance from your partner. Your partner was not trying to make you look good. But your resilience is engaged.

You quickly recover and adjust to the new circumstances. This was the crux of Nietzsche's maxim, 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger'.

To produce the new work of art, you must be open to discovery and diversion along the way. It means letting go of the original intention of what it was going to be. In life it's easier to make progress if we have a sense of direction. And we also remain aware that there may be diversions as we proceed and we can equip ourselves with resources (let's call them 'resilience') to deal effectively with them.

I used to be a newspaper reporter, an individualistic sort of profession in that you produce pieces of your own writing. It's tempting to adopt an attitude that 'my work is precious', which instantly creates tension with the sub-editors whose job is to make the articles fit (in style and in length) to the page. I learned that journalism is collaborative. While

colleagues didn't always treat my work exactly as I wanted, it was not the end of the world.

Whether you are a coach, a leader or a teacher, you discover that interactions are at the heart of constructive communications.

We say, 'The action is in the interaction'. And because each interaction is unique - in context or content - it takes an element of spontaneity to give it value.

Interactions are also at the heart of learning. And the best leaders during times of change are those who learn as they go, responding and adapting to each new circumstance. You pay less attention to the plan and more attention to doing something different as and when it is needed.

Leaders need to be comfortable with both structure and freedom; planning and instant response; a clear awareness of direction and the agility to work with whatever emerges. In short, improvisation equips leaders to work in complex settings.

You operate at an advantage when you comfortably respond in the moment, for example as your meetings with colleagues develop. You get to approach your strategic goals by developing fluency in your tactics.

A leader is constantly improvising. If we understand improvisation as the exercise of freedom within a structure, your philosophy of leadership provides a structure, and it is within this that you are rapidly making choices. As you develop your improvisation skills, you get better at making more appropriate responses. It gets easier.

This occurs as you dive deeper into your:

Listening skills - in theatrical improvisation, the performer's first duty is to listen to what is happening in the scene, so as

to join (or continue) precisely that scene. If they have not been attentive and aware, they will upset the audience by appearing to lurch into a different reality. This tends to look either selfish, careless or both. The same applies to leaders in organisations: they need to be attentive to clues from their closest colleagues, from the business environment and from wider social trends.

Ability to be present - the state of being ready in the here and now; avoiding distractions of past, future and awareness wandering elsewhere. That enables leaders to notice precisely what is happening, picking up on the extra details that are easily missed and that make the crucial difference.

Responsiveness - the ability to respond in the moment to the signals around us and to our own relevant processes. Whoever is best at thinking on their feet will be fastest to come up with the right response.

Creativity - accessing your ability to generate ideas precisely when needed, including connecting what's already there in unprecedented combinations.

The leader applies all of the above skills to progress beyond formulaic leading. It is fine to have a structure, to know in advance what you want and have a plan for getting there; what makes the difference is using freedom within that structure, and it is improvisational skills that equip the leader to use the structures to best advantage. We can usefully think of the leader as a highly-skilled performer in every organisational project and conversation.

As we know, a primary skill, and one that is sometimes counter-intuitive, is saying 'Yes,' in response to offers. In dramatic improvisation, saying 'Yes' to a partner's offer during a scene is the main technique for keeping that scene progressing. For a leader, it is part of accepting others as valuable contributors to the project. It also reinforces the interactional principle of staying on the surface, working

with what you get, co-constructing as you go along, not looking to impose pre-thought theories or to search for hidden meanings. Better ideas stand more chance of emerging in the course of the conversation.

An improvisational performer becomes expert at leading and at following, and at knowing when each is appropriate. Likewise, the leader is in a 'dance of conversation' with colleagues, clients and the wider world.

Paradox

It may seem paradoxical to speak of techniques for spontaneity. Yet through application of techniques we may reach a point at which pure spontaneity takes over. Relish those moments during your experience of improvisation when everything simply flows. And the same can occur when leading, coaching, facilitating, or presenting: you know what to do, you do it effortlessly and it fits the context perfectly. In short, it works.

Why do we need to be adept with spontaneity?

It enables us to handle whatever comes up, riding over the bumps inevitable in any interactional situation. It sharpens our receptivity, so that we can learn new skills and be open to new experience. It widens our range, so that we continue to grow.

Improvisation opens the door to take in more of our experience and is an alternative to blocking out the many signals that are available to us.

As a developer, how could these core skills help you to span those gaps from where people are now to where they want to be? What will you do to incorporate these principles and techniques into your work?

More broadly, why is it worth our while to promote an interest in improvisation in organisations?

Improvisation is a potent metaphor that throws new and useful light on how we might think about organisations. The vocabulary and patterns of improvisation are a model of much of what seems important in teams, organisations and society.

Techniques derived from theatrical improvisation offer a set of practical skills that are increasingly in demand in organisations today.

From the metaphor, we may liken organisational strategy to a theatrical script. It is not always possible or desirable to stick with the script. Whether we like it or not, we find ourselves improvising. Better then, to learn how to recognise this and to do it more skillfully. If the chief executive is the director and the employees are actors with defined roles (or functions), we get a sense of the relationships between them.

There are skills that all actors learn, such as getting-out-there-and-performing that have long been recognised as valuable within organisations, which have engaged theatrical sages to coach presentation skills, for example. Then there are additional skills in the specialist domain of the improviser: and these are in exciting new areas such as responsiveness and creativity, ready for leaders, managers, facilitators and coaches to equip themselves.

Leading organisations are increasingly including these in their competency lists for their people, especially at the top. I consulted with two organisations which are developing, respectively, 'improvisation' and 'agility' as core leadership skills.

As more companies recognise their constraints of time and their exposure to fast environmental changes, this recognition and demand will grow rapidly.

From an evolutionary perspective, the central question for organisations as a whole and for the individuals within them is how to adapt. If adaptation is a mixture of responsiveness and creativity, then many of the answers will be found from the skilled practice of improvisation.

The improviser knows the route to purposeful co-operation, by saying yes, making use of what is there and adding something of value, while respecting what is already working.

We'll benefit from strategists who understand that we live in a world where the concept and reality of emergence tells us more than the classic tenets of strategic planning.

It's a VUCA world. VUCA, a military-derived term, meaning Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous, was the theme for the Applied Improvisation Network world conference in Berlin in 2013. An old adage says 'Generals are always planning for the last war'. The next invariably features an unexpected aspect that demands improvisation.

It's not only the world of warcraft that is VUCA. Improvisation itself is too; an elusive array of tools and ideas, eminently suited to dealing with those sorts of issues.

The unpredictable nature of improvisation means it can never guarantee success.

But it offers a fruitful metaphor for understanding the nature of organisational life. And its applications as a set of skills and techniques are limited only by our imaginations - imaginations that will soar in responsiveness and creativity as we exercise them in improvisations.

Games to solve problems

If a game is played for more than fun or mere passing of time, we can ask what it is for, either directly or potentially.

It may be for learning concepts or skills, or to solve a problem by modeling the problematic situation and showing useful ways forward.

Suppose we have the problem of a team in which people don't listen to each other, when they need to. A game that features the skill of 'tuning in' might offer the solution.

Telepathy is a tuning-in game, a quiet activity, which provides a measure of group alignment. Together the group aims to count from one to twenty. Anyone can say the next number in the sequence, but if two people speak at the same time, we start again from 'one'. No individual can count more than one consecutive number and there's no discussion during the game to come up with strategies.

This sort of activity helps the team to feel better, calmer and more aligned with each other.

We could use the same activity to draw attention to how we observe each other and notice subtle signals in body language of what other people are doing.

I have presented word-at-at-time activities to illustrate Systems Theory. Other games work directly to resolve conflict; some give us practical experiences in leading and following.

In a game such as 'Category Cruncher' (described in the next chapter and detailed in my book '58½ Ways to Improvise In Training' [32]), you experience distributive leadership, self-organising teams and emergence, equipping you with immediate information to reflect on how it was to lead, how it was to follow and that interesting environment when you're doing both at the same time as your partner.

While games have direct impacts, they are not interactive therapy. They work more by planting seeds into people's minds, seeds that germinate to make them aware in the

workplace. You do most of these exercises in the workshop, not the workplace - unless you have people who want to do them in the workplace too.

Improvisational activity addresses problems ranging from simply-solved questions such as how to warm up or energise a group, to introducing participants to a flow experience, through to sophisticated matters of how we sort out leadership within this organisation.

Sometimes one game solves several problems, or you may need several games to solve one problem. The art is finding the right games and sequences for the pertinent issues.

What problems do you face in life or at work where you suspect improvisation has something to offer?

Suppose, for example, that within an organisation, people are felt to be too shy and individualistic. You could select 'Shark Island' as a simple activity offering a safe space for participants to grow more expressive at their own pace.

I often use it with groups as an energiser, as it's fast and physical. The facilitator asks the group to move randomly around, explaining that we are all swimming in a sea infested with sharks. The only way to reach safety is to form an island. An island consists of a group of a specific number of people, the number shouted out by the facilitator.

Anyone not part of a group of the given size is consumed by the imaginary sharks and performs either an inconspicuous or a spectacular and noisy death. The waters are miraculously restorative, so all are revived for the following rounds, in which different numbers represent safety.

Thus individuals swap from group to group quickly, for no particular personal reasons, forming and disbanding alliances as they go. If that mirrors behaviours in

organisational teams, it becomes a vibrant topic for a debriefing discussion.

If your team members are too cautious and you want them to take more risks in certain situations, you'll have noticed that many games prompt mistakes, which the group can regulate. Games in which people have to count, often while focusing on another modality, such as movement, work well for this.

Improvisation can help us change our attitude toward trivial mistakes. It can teach us to let go of them and move on quickly. In improvisation games the penalties for making mistakes are minimal, and can even be enjoyable in their own right, so they don't matter that much. Your group reinforces this healthy attitude and the session is training in being okay to take risks and recover quickly from errors.

My colleague Dan Weinstein writes, 'Improvisation might be a quicker way compared to meditation of learning to let go of mistakes and developing a sense of balance. I would think this would be due to the social element. If we chastise ourselves over our mistakes and our awkwardness, we probably do it because we picked up negative cues about mistakes and other behaviors from other people. Maybe surrounding ourselves with people who don't make a big deal about mistakes counteracts those influences, leaving us healthy!' [personal communication, 2015]

Reflection questions: Easy does it

How are you developing control of where to put your attention?

How open are you to letting go of your original intention, so you can enjoy the discoveries and diversions in producing new work?

How do you discover and keep those rules that furnish you with success?

Which games would you like to play with colleagues to generate discussions that will improve your workplace?

10 Who am I?

Improvisation expands our sense of who we are and what we are capable of. The techniques described in this chapter bring out resources that may have been hidden or dormant, allowing you to experience what it is like when they are playing a bigger part in your interactions. They make it easier for you to be yourself.

Improvisational Writing

Here's an improvisational writing exercise in self-discovery.

Write a page or two, prompted by this phrase:

'When I find myself uncertain about what to do next in the heat of the moment I... '

Interpret the instruction as you wish, making your own choice about whether to be realistically accurate or fantastically aspirational.

You now have two strands for reflection. One is what you wrote: your essay on how you deal with uncertainty. And the other is how you responded to the task: what happened moment to moment as you actually improvised (as a writer).

'Future Perfect Party'

Improvisation is imaginative play.

Suppose that we meet again in six months' time and you have done extraordinary things in between. You return to share your outstanding achievements with the rest of your group. You are interested in what they have done and you know they want to hear about you. You notice how successful they look.

Our imagined setting is a networking party where you mingle and socialise, then move on to meet other guests. If there is a status element to the game, it is not to outdo each other. Rather it's to support the elevated status of everyone in the room. You could approach with, 'I'm hearing amazing rumours of how well you've been doing…' as an invitation to a colleague to tell you of their success.

What we want to hear is detailed descriptions of what success looks like. Any praise is purely incidental. Gushing is forbidden. It's better to prompt each other - 'You're looking fit'; 'I'm hearing great things about you'; 'What was that story about you in the financial press…?'

As the party progresses, feel free to borrow or adapt elements of your colleagues' tales to enrich your own story.

The purpose is to improvisationally experience exercising your creative imagination, with an individual and collective process of 'Yes… And'-ing. You gain greater clarity about a future you might like to reach. Your clarity is enriched by having participated in a kind of rehearsal that is often powerful enough to prompt ambition and motivation.

The activity is a 'Yes… And' immersion, with an invitation to plunge in, confident that we are all playing the game of supporting and developing your depiction of your future success. This works partly because your success is not at the expense of anyone else in the group.

On reflection, you sense the possibilities of future achievements, while cushioning them on an appreciation of how much you have already achieved.

One participant in a session described to the group how he, in his imagined future, would enjoy winning the world aerobatics championship. He told us afterwards that he used to fly stunt planes as a hobby, and that the venture into the Future Perfect Party reminded himself that while he'd never

been remotely good enough to be world champion, he did enjoy his flying, and he had decided to get back into it for fun.

In a Future Perfect Party, the encouragement to tell (imagined) stories of success nudges people to speak freely, to enter territory that's emotional as well as intellectual.

The improvisational organisation

'Category Cruncher' is another activity in which participants gently explore aspects of their identity. It also introduces the idea of resources by inviting participants to consider which categories, resourceful or otherwise, they fit.

Participants quickly find out what they need to know about each other, sorting themselves into groups accordingly. They discover what they have in common or difference with each other. And in the prototype negotiations, they make fast, decisions, enjoying the improvisational activity of choosing freely within a series of shifting structures.

Each group is identified by what they have in common regarding the announced category. For example, if the category is 'pets', the participants might split into just two groups: those with pets and those without. Or they may elect to form multiple groups of dog-owners, cat-owners, used to have a pet, never had a pet, etc.

It's a game in which simple rules lead rapidly to complex interactions. It's similar, for example, to the computer simulation 'Boids' [33] often used to illustrate the nature of complexity and the complexity of nature.

A simple rule in 'Category Cruncher' is that any group consists of at least two people. The rule guarantees that nobody gets left on their own. The rule that 'not everyone can be in the same group' forces a meaningful choice.

As further categories are offered, so the participants may take longer to identify which group is which, and to choose which group they are in. Often they will qualify for more than one within any category. For example, in Transport someone may own a bike, a car and a yacht.

In one round of the game, with the category of Food, a group formed around the common factor of 'spicy'. One participant commented, 'I love spice but I don't actually eat it any more. But I forgot that element of the truth, because for the purpose of this game right now, I committed to be a spicy person. I suppose it was because of the sense of belonging. I know what it feels like to love spice, that's true. I can relate to you guys on a spice level'.

As social beings we feel the urge to identify with any welcoming group. Even if you're no longer eating spice, you are tempted to stay with your tribe.

The game requires you to make swift choices, and you practice being decisive in forming and joining groups. Strategies abound. Some players go around asking, 'What's your group, what have you got to offer, to tempt me?'

One strategy is to make quick decisions and stick with the consequences. The advantage is to reduce uncertainty; you don't have to worry any more. But you could be missing out on an even better offer a few seconds later. Another tactic is to appreciate taking your time, waiting until you feel happy to plump for what's right for you, rather than rushing to join a group that is not entirely suitable.

The game plunges you into uncertainty and emergence. You cannot know what groups will be proposed. I have heard many surprising offers, such as the precise year gaps between siblings, and a group of people who eat insects.

When you choose your own group you have a stronger sense of belonging and ownership. That's enhanced by naming the

group, making a categorical statement that says, 'This is going to be a group about ....'

In the game, you actively choose which group you want to be a part of. No one tells you which group to join. In the workplace sometimes it is different, and you are assigned a group. In other circumstances, let's say in your choice of social activities, you are allowed to take your time and see what's available before making a decision. Might you enjoy the more extended uncertainty in playing around with your group choices?

And what if we could self-select our preferred work projects with our colleagues? You could position yourself with a group of 50 like-minded people, sharing passion and a sense of belonging. I guess that would be exceptionally productive.

That would be a significant characteristic of what we might identify as 'The Improvisational Organisation'. It happens to some extent in voluntary organisations now.

There is no acceptable reason why work cannot be organised more like that. In an improvisational organisation, people would self-select groups and these groups would be self-managed teams, tackling projects of value to the organisation.

One current example is Sweden's 'The Free School' [34] in which teachers offer classes in all the subjects, but there is no schedule until the students decide which classes they wish to attend.

University level education is increasingly like that too. Students choose the subjects they want, how they want to study, and where and who with. The internet is making it easier to access top-quality courses at low prices almost anywhere.

In some research circles, the process is to solicit colleagues interested in a shared topic to collaborate on a project. And on the political front, how about 'The Improvisational Society', in which you select and participate in how your taxes are spent?

How welcoming or impenetrable are the groups that you would like to join? Are there groups that you are in that you would like to leave? How are they keeping you? Are there groups that you would like to start?

You can use improvisational strategies to organise conferences and large meetings. I was part of a group of 10 people who organised a large conference in Oxford and our first planning session consisted of talking to each other in small groups about what a great conference would be like. We asked, 'How would we know it had been a great conference? What we would be noticing before, during and after the conference? What would the participants be noticing? What would the vibe be like? What comments might a fly on the wall hear?'

The imaginative excursion gave us a rich and detailed picture. Some of the elements were not possible for us to do, but it did not matter. Those conversations set a tone of aspiration and collaboration, which had an enormous impact on the outcome; prefiguring dozens of details of the planning process and the conference itself.

Entire conferences are based on improvisational principles. 'Open Space' [35] is the Harrison Owen technology where people form their own agenda, then decide which sessions to attend. 'Open Space' is improvisation: small steps into emergent space along an unpredictable route.

In 'Open Space', the 'Law of Two Feet' gives participants permission - more, a duty - to leave sessions in which they are neither giving nor receiving value. It's fluid, flexible and self-organising. 'Open Space' was prompted by Owen's

realisation that in the conferences he was attending, the breaks were the best bits. So he devised rules to create sessions that resembled breaks: participants mix with whoever they want, have the conversation that they want to have and then disperse to other conversations when ready.

Augusto Boal

Augusto Boal is perhaps best known amongst trainers and facilitators for creating Forum Theatre. His books include 'Theatre of the Oppressed' [36] and 'Games for Actors and Non-Actors' [37]. The latter is a phenomenal resource of activities for trainers and facilitators.

His wide-ranging contributions include developing forms of theatre that increase spectator involvement. In Forum Theatre, for example, they may stop the action and propose something else that could happen which would be a better way of dealing with the oppression that the people in the scene are experiencing. The actors then re-play the scene to see how that works out.

In a further step, spectators may join in with the action; they can replace an actor. I've seen variations of this used as a methodology within organisations, mostly without the political dimensions that motivated Boal.

His writings are richly suggestive of more participatory forms of democracy, and he provides practical tools for engaging people in determining their own futures.

Adrian Jackson translated several of Boal's books into English and collaborated with him in workshops. He's the director of the Cardboard

Citizens Theatre Company, which works primarily with homeless people.

Status

'Status Party' is an activity inviting you to experiment with your status. We collectively imagine we are at a summer garden party. There's catering (which can be real, if the budget stretches that far), a group of musicians, and you are involved in this party for some reason or another up to you.

You'll mingle with the other people who are there: guests, hosts and staff. You may decide who you are before you join the party, or you could make that choice during the event. Whatever you choose, you can embellish your reasons and responses during the course of the party.

Your focus is on social status, and your status is indicated by allocation of a random playing card. Ace is the highest, then King, Queen and so on down to 2.

The thing is you don't know what card you've got. When your card is dealt to you, you hold it face outwards against your forehead, so that it is visible to everyone else.

You'll pick up information from your interactions during the party. You're looking out for cues and clues with which to assess your status. At this party it is considered terribly rude to talk about status (or about playing cards) directly. Instead, you discuss the décor, the food, the music, your recent activities - anything other than status.

When the party's over, everyone takes a guess at their status level as indicated by the allocated card.

The guesses are usually surprisingly accurate. How did you know that you held a low card? 'People were handing me coats and asking me to fetch drinks'.

How did you know that you were high? ‘A few of us ended up with a classical music discussion.’ ‘Others seemed reluctant to join in with the discussion, as if they did not feel worthy enough’. Guests often gravitate to fellows of similar status in the game.

It’s easy to recognise your status, even in an artificial situation. We are all status experts, which is to say we give and accept a constant stream of signals that govern our ‘place’ from moment to moment.

Most of us portray a status that is comfortable for us in each situation in life. You may play a different status with your family than with your colleagues. It probably changes depending on whether you are with your parents, siblings or children.

Status is fluid, adjustable according to context. And we use our expertise at it to fit into social gatherings, responding to cues from second to second. Most cues are considerably subtler than instructions to fetch drinks.

For many, our feelings of status are geared to our work. High status and expertise is conferred by the very word ‘profession’.

You can indicate status with titles such as professor, doctor or chief. What you wear conveys status, often connected to work (either current or by historical association).

It makes sense to raise or lower our status to get more of what we want. Lowering your status will increase your approachability; by disarming yourself, you disarm others. When I taught status to senior police officers, they realised they used low status to defuse tense situations of crowd control, at demonstrations and football matches. Taking higher status leads to more clashes.

In a job interview, taking a slightly lower status than the interviewer's will generally serve you well.

Keith Johnstone says that the test of friendship is that people are playful with each other's status. If I bring a guest a cup of tea in the morning, I can say to a friend, 'Here is your tea, Your Majesty'.

'American Psycho'

This next game takes the flexibility of how we choose to express ourselves even further than the status activities.

I collect dozens of business cards and put an assortment on a table, inviting each player to pick an appealing card.

Each card carries many clues about the person, not only name, profession and address, but also taste as evidenced in graphic style, colour schemes and textural quality. For further readings, it's worth studying the business card scene in the film 'American Psycho' [38].

Once you have a sense of the character you have selected, you walk around the room, with due speed, tension, facial expression and status, introducing yourself to the other characters. As the activity progresses, you define more and more about yourself, dropping some attributes, keeping others.

On reflection, many aspects of your made-up character are recognisably aspects of you. The walk and the talk are in your range of movements, otherwise you could not do them.

You have been inspired by a piece of paper carrying certain words and symbols. You 'create a character'. Yet everything the character does is done by you, as a response in the here and now.

Where is this character coming from? It looked like you, it moved in an exact way you move, it sounded a lot like you; so for anyone observing it was credible, except that we understood that you were presenting another person.

I guess it is an adjusted or exaggerated version of yourself that you are playing. Or there are elements that you are choosing to allow to enter the room for a limited time.

Maybe it is apparent that you can add or subtract elements of your real-life character, too. Maybe you told stories that were true for you, or maybe you made them up.

In terms of one's life story, the rest of your story is influenced but not governed by what has happened so far. A different character presents and responds differently, and will have different outcomes.

We already present ourselves with variations from context to context. If you are the class clown for a group, it is almost a contract, agreed by all in the group. If you stop playing the clown, people may notice and be disappointed. Yet you are assuredly somebody completely different elsewhere. Each version or slice of you is negotiated in social interactions.

Personal possibility

When we are presented with somebody's public face, we are predisposed to accept them at 'face value', until there are warning signals to suggest otherwise. From our own point of view, it's a reasonable assumption that people are predisposed to generally accept what we present.

This allows us an extensive realm of possibility in how we present ourselves. If you can change your story and change what you are saying about yourself, why not make your best self the memorable one?

I'm not recommending sudden or difficult change, for that introduces a danger that you'll fail to convince yourself, let alone any audience. Start with an easy change; venture out of your comfort zone with small steps rather than diving into the deep end.

Reflection questions: Easy does it

Next time you are uncertain, what would you be pleased to catch yourself doing?

What stories would you like to be telling about yourself in six months' time?

What sort of groups do you want to join? What sort of groups do you want to leave?

What's your current range of status with which you are comfortable? How can you explore the edges of that range to your advantage?

11 What came first and what's next?

Let's trace a few strands of improvisational history, to glean insights into how various techniques have extended from their use in the arts into tools to make everyday life more easy.

Improvisation traditions in theatre, film and TV

There's a long tradition of improvisation in theatre, stretching back to Commedia dell'arte and Shakespeare; and in music from Mozart to Indian raga and jazz.

More recently, to pick one of my favourite strands, the films (and plays) of Mike Leigh are scripted entirely before they are filmed or played before an audience. Yet the process of script preparation requires a great deal of improvisation from the actors. Once cast by Leigh, they begin to prepare a character, prompted by Leigh's interview questions and drawing on people they know or observe.

Eventually the director invites characters to meet each other, to find out what happens when they connect. From these meetings, Leigh writes the script, which is filmed. This results in tremendous depth of character and a hyper-real quality to their encounters.

Ruth Jones and James Corden used a similar, if less elaborate process in developing their hugely successful TV series 'Gavin and Stacey' [39]

Earlier, Rob Brydon and Julia Davis improvised all their characters for their 6-part TV series 'Human Remains' [40]. They sequestered themselves in the seaside resort of Brighton for several weeks, then improvised with each other

to prepare the six scripts, in each of which they play a different couple.

I trained Ruth, Rob and Julia in improvisational techniques while they were members of my improv theatre troupe 'More Fool Us'.

Brydon is currently one of Britain's most popular comedy performers, and in his autobiography he makes clear just how important the application of improvisation has been to his success. In 'Small Man In A Book' [41], he details years of professionally unsatisfactory work as a radio announcer, voice-over artist and bit-part actor, before his breakthroughs - first with the heartfelt character comedy of 'Marion and Geoff', then with 'Human Remains', and the consolidation with perhaps his best-loved role of Uncle Bryn in the hit sitcom 'Gavin and Stacey' [42].

Now he is a regular host of chat shows and panel games on TV, and a big draw for his live stand-up comedy shows. And improvisation has played a significant part in his professional turning points.

He describes his first work with me during his four years in my improvisation comedy team More Fool Us, during the mid-90's: 'I felt like I belonged. It was a good feeling, but it also reinforced my belief that I'd taken a wrong turn in becoming so wrapped up in radio and television presenting. Paul had gathered a strong team of performers and we went on to play some great shows in Bristol, Bath and beyond.'

Those were classic improv shows, and it was some years later that Rob rediscovered the improvisation principles that led to his fame and fortune. In 'Marion and Geoff' [43], a low-budget solo show, Rob and his co-writer Hugo Blick would devise an episode. Then in his solo performance with his writing colleague hidden in the back of the car in which the entire programme was shot, 'I was able to improvise and create material on the spot, which could be instantly edited

and added to by Hugo as he sat crouching out of sight in the back of the car.'

Rob drew on four other members of the More Fool Us team, Julia Davis, Jane Roth, Ruth Jones and Toby Longworth, to populate his next series, 'Human Remains'.

His co-writer is Julia Davis, but things don't go according to plan when they start scripting. 'Nothing happened. I should, perhaps, say incredibly nothing happened, as we'd arrived full of enthusiasm… by the end of the afternoon it was clear that nothing was going to come and so we decided, in a mood of great disappointment, to call it a day. As an afterthought, I suggested that maybe it would be better if we just did what we'd done back in Bath - improvise and see what happened.'

Immediately characters came tumbling out. 'We were able to talk and talk, in character, for hours at a time, often making each other howl with laughter, weaving intricate storylines that arose entirely naturally and unforced.'

It's interesting to note that the same improvisational processes, techniques and skills were to the fore as Ruth Jones co-wrote Gavin and Stacey (in collaboration with James Corden).

Ruth Jones describes her improvisation memories in an interview with the BBC: 'It was started in Bath in the early 90s by a guy called Paul Z Jackson who was brilliant at teaching us the ins and outs of improvised comedy. The golden rule was 'Yes… And'. I used to love doing it. It was just like playing. Sometimes we were really funny. And other times we were painfully bad. Thing is, there's no way I could do it now. I used to say to Julia when we were filming, 'God, can you imagine having to do an impro show now?' I would die of nerves.'

Ruth and Rob had learned comedy improvisation performance, but it was not immediately obvious to them

that applying the principles to comedy writing could be just as productive. In fact, even more productive in many ways, as the freedom from responding to audiences' somewhat constrained scene suggestions, and the ability to refine and edit from the best of the material, made for richer final scripts.

In a 2009 interview in The Observer [44], we learn that Ruth Jones 'discovered a new way of writing with Corden. They have found that they always have to be in the same room, and they tend to improvise the scene, acting out each of the characters, doing all the voices.'

And these scripts are typically strengthened even further by improvisational contributions from other performers. Rob again: 'Toby Longworth had always been the star of the impro group…He came in to audition for 'Human Remains' and blew us away with an improvisation, which we lifted in its entirety into the episode.'

As in the process described by Larry David for 'Curb Your Enthusiasm' [45] scenarios are planned ahead to take the plot from A to B, but the precise way in which that happens is improvised by the characters as they respond to each other's dialogue with the cameras rolling.

For that to work well, you need actors skilled in improvisation, and it is no accident that Brydon calls in the More Fool Us squad. 'Paul taught me techniques that I still use today, the most basic of which can be summarised as 'Yes… And'. Straight away we're building the scene, as opposed to blocking each other.'

By the end of the scripting process on his TV comedies, Rob records, 'I can't imagine how we would have created such a fully realised world without just sitting there and talking to each other in character to each other over many hours, then painstakingly reducing it to the best bits and shaping what was left into a script.'

I'm thrilled that so many members of the team have flourished, and that applying improvisation proves central to unlocking their talents. I'm also delighted that they generously acknowledge my part in setting them on that track, whilst remaining slightly amazed that it takes so long for the pieces to fall into place - that creating the shows means improvising in the writing and character development, as well as in performance in the moment.

Larry David has his own twist on 'Freedom within structure' for 'Curb Your Enthusiasm'. I'm sure there are dozens of other great examples. Many classic British sit-coms were created and written by writing duos, and it seems more than plausible that these partners would each take a character and speak dialogue aloud before one of them would capture the results on typewriter, word-processor or camera.

It may be only the written artefact of the script, lifted above the ephemeral moments of dialogue creation, which has led to the historical neglect of the role of improvisation in the creation of these classics. Are we more easily impressed by product than process?

The history of improvisation is at least as long as the history of entertainment. Sometimes the improvisational aspects are more prominent, as with Commedia dell'arte in Italy or improvised clowning in Shakespearean theatre.

At other times we put greater emphasis on the scripted or prepared. This may reflect the relative permanence of a medium. Film has traditionally been expensive to make and is best known to us in its final unchanging form. Yet, while the industry may have its reasons for favouring careful scripting and meticulous preparation, the improvisational tradition flourishes in the films of directors such as John Cassavetes. Woody Allen allows actors to improve their Allen-scripted lines while he shoots their scenes.

The Improvisation Academy

The Comedy Store Players joined me in 2013 in setting up the Improvisation Academy. Since 1985, the Players have been performing as a team, their longevity recognised by the Guinness Book of Records. They appear every Wednesday and Sunday in London, mostly featuring the current core team of Josie Lawrence, Paul Merton, Neil Mullarkey, Lee Simpson, Andy Smart and Richard Vranch. Several of them made their names in the classic improvisation UK television series of 'Whose Line Is It Anyway'.

In many improvisation groups around the world, performers offer classes to their audiences. When an audience sees a great show, they might wonder how it's done and how they can get involved. A community of performing and teaching develops, often with extra outreach to local organisations. Before 2013, that hadn't yet happened with the Players in London.

With Neil Mullarkey and Lee Simpson as co-directors, we have now established a curriculum that covers the application of improvisation to a series of topics in life and at work. While the three of us are passionate about theatre and comedy, the activities of the Academy do not teach theatre (or comedy) or require any theatrical (or comedic) skills from participants. We're interested in what the ideas and principles of improvisation offer to individuals, teams and communities. These ideas can be found in many fields, of which theatre just happens to be currently prominent.

This means that we work with anyone who needs to be creative or innovative; where they need to perform better in the widest senses of performance; where people interact in groups and need to navigate complexity to solve problems, innovate or work more constructively together.

And why me? Well, I've worked with most of the Comedy Store Players over many years, not as a performer, but as a producer, primarily as a BBC producer of radio comedies. And I've been teaching improvisation, first to actors, then to

members of the public, and then within organisations. In 2001 I co-founded the Applied Improvisation Network of which I'm currently President.

Here's a TEDx talk [46] in which I describe how all that happened.

> ***Neil Mullarkey***
>
> *Neil Mullarkey co-founded the Comedy Store Players in 1985 and has been performing with them ever since. He also does great workshops for organisations either as himself or as his alter ego, success coach L. Vaughan Spencer, who has a long ponytail.*

Applied Improvisation Network

The Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) is a worldwide network of improvisers who teach and apply the principles of improvisation. Their work is for individuals or groups who seek personal development, better teamwork, and more thriving communities.

Although actors form a significant cadre within the community of around 5,000 members, the focus is less on players performing for a stage audience, more on directly impacting personal or organisational change.

While working independently with clients, as coaches, consultants, academics, facilitators, trainers and managers in an extensive range of organisations and communities, members share with each other in this community of practice.

There are local groups in many cities throughout the world, such as the London group that meets once a month. And there is an annual conference, where hundreds of

improvisers generate improbable quantities of constructive energy.

AIN is improvisational by nature as well as subject matter. As an entirely volunteer-powered organisation, anyone may, for example, post a suggestion for a project and pursue it to the extent that there is enthusiastic support for the idea.

You can join by completing a short questionnaire on the website or by applying to join the lively Facebook group.

> ***Armando Diaz***
>
> *Each year at the AIN conference, we interview one of the significant figures from the history of improvisation, to keep us directly in touch with the people who developed the theories and concepts from which we all benefit. Armando Diaz is one such figure.*
>
> *There is a celebrated improvisation performance format called 'The Armando', named after Armando Diaz. In 'The Armando', Mr Diaz, a thoughtful man, steps onto stage to recall an incident from his life. His monologue inspires the team of performers to improvise scenes based on his story. As the inspiration drops, Armando speaks again, alternating monologues and scenes throughout the show.*
>
> *'The Armando' remains one of the most popular improv formats in the world.*

Takeaways

What do people actually value when they finish a course in Applied Improvisation? How do these activities and reflections serve to make life easy?

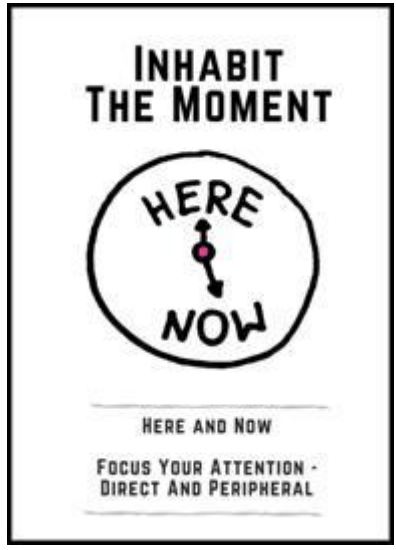
Here are reflections from participants at the Improvisation Academy on their top takeaways, in relation to the elements of LIFEPASS.

Let go

‘When the stakes are low, don’t be afraid of mistakes.’

This is often the biggest eye-opener. In this environment, it is OK to make mistakes, unlike in school where we were penalised for making mistakes.

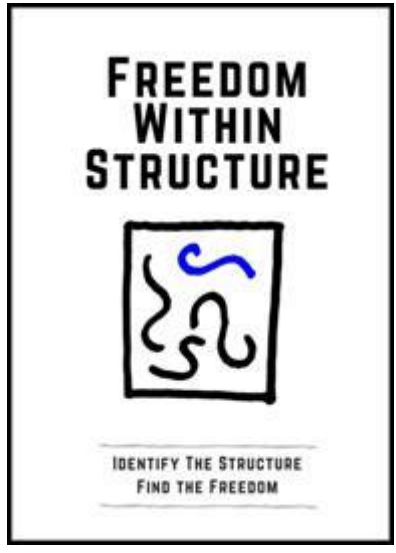
Inhabit the moment



'Get into the 'Here and Now"

Our participants relish the moments of flow, when they are absorbed in the activity, and appreciate how easy it is both to drift away from that awareness and equally to re-capture it when you wish.

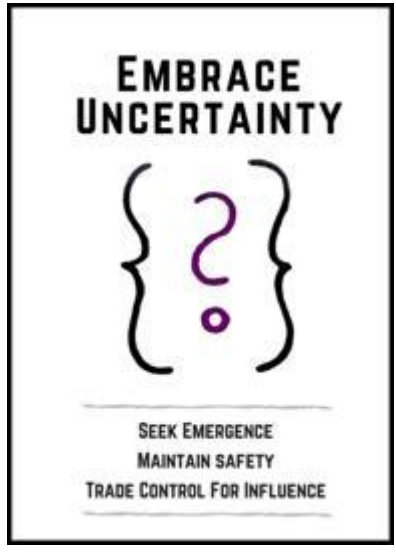
Freedom within structure



‘Identify structures and enjoy the freedoms.’

A really useful perspective: you get a rapid sense of what the rules are, how you flourish within those rules; or, if you wish, challenge them to create a new game or a new set of structures.

Embrace uncertainty



‘We all recognise that life is uncertain, so there is value in improving our ability to cope with those uncertainties.’

Yes, there are situations in which you feel uncomfortable - and there are ways to deal with it. It’s useful to remember that there are also rewards for saying 'No', to keep feeling safer in uncertain circumstances. When we find ourselves flourishing in an improvisational game, it builds confidence for dealing with the unpredictability and sudden shifts in our everyday lives.

Play to play

‘It’s usually easy to identify what winning is - and to assume that winning is the point.’

But there’s more to a game than winning. It can be as simple as participating in something that could be of value to you. And part of any game is working out what that value might be.

Each game offers many pleasures besides coming out on top. Following one of the ideas of the philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, life can be described as a set of games, each with its own conventions. While games can certainly be serious, they also offer us the opportunity to be a little less harsh on ourselves; and in relaxing we are more productive.

Accept and build

'Yes… And'-ing may be easily understood, but for many of us it takes a while to put into practice, whether in or out of a workshop setting.'

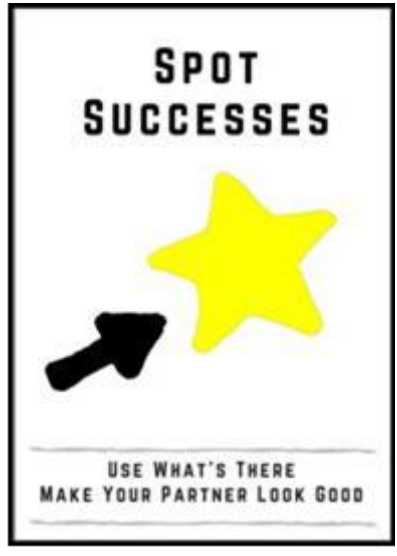
Our defenses are well fortified by the time we finish formal education, and skilled 'Yes… But'-ing is deeply ingrained.

Short turn taking

‘Back and forth is the discipline that gets us into flow, into easy collaboration, into making our partners look good.’

Taking shorter turns may just be the easiest tool for making life easier.

Spot successes



'When we met our Muses and looked at the conditions for creativity, I was able to notice what worked for me and implement them more often, even develop them more in my day. I realised that at home it really makes a difference which room I have my laptop in if I want to do really good work'.

You can set yourself 'positive traps', such as keeping your running kit visible (if you want to run more), putting healthy snacks in the kitchen (if you want to eat more healthily) or automating your payments to those services you know you want to keep enjoying.

What to do next?

If you want to further your interest in these ideas, you are welcome to take a greater part in the Applied Improvisation community. You can join the Applied Improvisation Network (for free) and get involved in local meetings, international conferences and on-line discussions.

You can look out for classes from the Improvisation Academy or bring the Academy to you. Let us know if you'd like to invite me to present a keynote talk or workshop at a conference

You might enjoy one of these special packages in order to take your learning to the next level.

Making Life Easy

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Free download of LIFEPASS Poster Set (normally £12.99 + VAT)
Plus free bonus features: download of '21 Games to Make Life Easy' - a handbook of activities for trainers, facilitators

and workshop leaders and audio download of 'Right Here, Right Now' visualisation.
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12 Readers, references and bonus materials

What readers are saying about Easy

'The most important skills in life - resilience, courage, and confidence - are directly related to improvisation and all of them are found in Easy.'

Dr Robert Biswas-Diener, author of The Upside of Your Dark Side

'Humanitarian work is becoming impossibly demanding. It seems too difficult to absorb and process changing threats. How can we rapidly think and act under so much pressure and uncertainty? It is actually doable and enjoyable, if you embrace applied improvisation - shared so eloquently and accessibly by Paul Z Jackson in 'Easy'. I recommend this book to all who aim to facilitate processes of learning and dialogue in a way that is both serious and fun.'

Pablo Suarez, PhD, Associate director for research and innovation, Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

'With practice, getting into the flow can be easier. This is a book of big ideas: you can use games to solve problems; it's possible to practice spontaneity, it's easy to make it easy.'

Mary Tyskiewicz, PhD, Heroic Improvisation

'The games give me an idea of gradual, additive improvisation which is a wonderful way to approach writing. Thank you! As both a writer and a teacher of composition in a variety of media, I deeply appreciate the orientation of starting where you are, seeing what is there, and working with what you find in the moment. The theme of cultivating

mental relaxation in spaces of safety is also key to learning. These principles are familiar, yet it is good to be reminded of them.'

Daniel J. Weinstein, PhD, Assistant Professor of English, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

'I really like the book and experienced some big moments of insight while reading it. I was happy to grasp that 'Yes' is not always the right response, even though I already knew that on another level.'

Dr J Christian Lang

'Improvisation is a key to open up our hearts. It reveals the universe of possibilities that you can see, feel, decide and deal with in your life. 'Easy' offers steps to find this key by starting with a step forward, a little step forward...constantly little steps forward, wherever you stand at the moment. It is up to you if you would like to move in this direction, but make sure, if you easily start to move in the path of improvisation, that you realise you are on the path to endless possibilities in your life. Start with a first step: open the first page... that's easy. I found good answers to deal with the fear of making mistakes.

'Easy is well-structured and is expressed in really clear language. It gives a good overview of topics close to improvisation and at the same time makes it clear where the borders are. This is a book that has a WOW effect and it comes from experience and knowledge.'

Isolde Fischer, Schauspielerin und Trainerin

'I LOVE it. My favorite thing: 'On Confidence: If we treat confidence as something we do rather than as an inner quality that we 'have', we can achieve extraordinary results in our everyday interactions.'

‘In our workshops I love doing the status exercise, especially when all levels of employees are present. I tell them that Keith Johnstone says ‘status is something we do, not who we are’. That always startles them. Now, I’m going to add that, according to Paul Z Jackson, confidence is also something we do! I love that!

I also think it’s a great lesson for kids! Imagine understanding that early on. I teach an after school improv/theater class for grades 2 – 6 and I will also work it in there.’

Ellen Schnur ImprovTalk – Improvisation Skills for Business & Life

‘Well done and thank you for the introduction to improvisation.’

Julia Duschenes, Society of the Teachers of Alexander Technique

‘I owe you a BIG thank you. Yesterday I was a keynote presenter at a huge educational conference in Southern California. On the flight down I was rereading Easy and I came upon several exercises that I had never seen before. It's often the simplest things that can provide a real AHA! In the afternoon I did a two-hour workshop for 50 educators. We used your brilliant ‘Future Perfect Party’ to vision some of the changes that they will be dreaming. That is one of the coolest exercises I've ever known. It's now on the top of my list of favorite group games. The book’s concept - to use improvisation for business and LIFE - is inspired and important and was what I was trying to do with my book a decade ago.

You have a fresh feeling and style to this which strikes me as adult and thoughtful without being academic’ Thank you for your book and your marvelous ideas and your

leadership. Good luck on your important work. Changing the world one improviser at a time time.'

Patricia Ryan Madson, author of Improv Wisdom

'Your book gives me a lot of inspiration! It makes sense to trade the illusion of control for the reality of influence. This sentence could be a mantra for the 'AI Manager.'

Stefan Stahl, Theater und Humor im Business

Acknowledgments

A note of thanks to the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN). This book was first shared in a special edition with AIN members and has benefitted from their feedback.

As President of AIN I have been blessed to meet so many talented and generous people, enjoyed such illuminating conversations and developed many of my most treasured friendships, that I wanted to return at least a few favours.

Also, most of the ideas expressed in here are the fruits of collaboration.

At AIN conferences I've not only learned or been reminded of hundreds of great activities, but have also been coached in how to present, side-coach and debrief them. A game may be a good game - and it is transformed into a great game when we bring out its relevance to the life or work of the players.

That's what I'm aiming to do with this project: show how improvisation activities and principles benefit us every day, whether or not we have anything to do with theatre or other performance arts.

The AIN community members are prime developers of this much-needed yet still obscure profession of applying improvisation.

So thanks to all of you for your perceptive and detailed feedback.

Text revision

Thanks to:

Andy Crouch
Angelina Castellini
Anita McKiernan

Bärbel Fink
Brent Darnell
Christine Fischer
Daniel J. Weinstein
Hannes Couvreur
Isolde Fischer
J Christian Lang
Johnnie Moore
Julia Duschenes
Katherine Lockton
Lisa Jacob
Mary Tyszkiewicz
Nat Tsolak
Patricia Ryan Madson
Renatus Hoogenraad
Russell Schoen
Simon Witney
Stefan Stahl
Stephanie Phillips

Illustrations

Angelina Castellini

Cover and LIFEPASS image design

Lisa Jacob

I'd also like to thank

*Angelina Castellini, Lisa Jacob, Raymond van Driel and Sarah McSorley f*or helping this book through the production process and keeping me on track.

About the author

Paul Z Jackson is a leader in the application of improvisation. Co-founder and President of the Applied Improvisation Network, he creates projects, workshops and training programmes that transform lives by developing collaborative skills.

He draws on his experiences in journalism, comedy production and the BBC to produce impactful, story-rich events that connect directly to the needs of the participants.

His passion for bringing out the best in people has led to work as a mentor, coach and trainer of trainers and facilitators. After ten years experience as a journalist with the Thomson Organisation, he took an interest in improvisation and comedy, setting up a series of performing groups that nurtured the talents of Steve Coogan, Rob Brydon and Ruth Jones. As a script-editor and senior producer with BBC Radio 4, he introduced dozens of writers to their first professional contracts.

A graduate of Oxford University, Paul has trained more than 1,000 coaches in the solutions-focused approach; coaches senior executives and police officers; is a supervisor for the Brief diploma course.

In addition to his extensive corporate work with clients including P&G, Crossrail, Tate, ZS and Deloitte, Paul has taught and lectured at the London Actors Centre, the CIPD, London Business School, Cranfield, Aalto and Ashridge schools of management.

Paul is an inspirational consultant, coach and facilitator. Audiences at conferences around the world and readers of his books benefit from his expertise in strategy, leadership, teamwork, creativity and innovation. He is director of leading change consultancy The Solutions Focus, director of

The Improvisation Academy, advisor to the AMED council, and serves on the SOLworld steering group.

More information here:

www.impro.org.uk and www.improvisationacademy.co.uk

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Other books by Paul Z Jackson

The Inspirational Trainer

(Amazon UK) (Amazon US)

58½ ways to improvise in training

(Amazon UK) (Amazon US)

The Solutions Focus - Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE (co-written with Mark McKergow) - rated as one of the Top 30 business books of the year in the USA

(Amazon UK) (Amazon US)

Positively Speaking - the art of constructive conversations with a solutions focus (co-written with Janine Waldman)

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Bonus materials

Access your bonus materials here – a free copy of '21 Games to Make Life Easy' - a handbook of activities for trainers, facilitators and workshop leaders' and a free download of the audio visualisation - 'Right Here, Right Now'.

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