



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation



INTERNATIONAL  
INSTITUTE FOR  
CRITICAL STUDIES IN  
IMPROVISATION

This version of the Improvisation Toolkit has been compiled for the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation for distribution on the [improvisationinstitute.ca](http://improvisationinstitute.ca) website. The Toolkit document was originally published on the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) website. Please credit sources appropriately. We've made every attempt to provide proper attribution for this tool. If you have concerns, please contact us at [improv@uoguelph.ca](mailto:improv@uoguelph.ca).



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Table of Contents	3
1-2 Listening Exercise	4
3 Scenes	5
Alliterative Name Game	6
Alter-Egos	7
Arms Game	8
Balloon Music	9
Bippity Bippity Bop	10
Boom Chicka Boom	11
Bumpity Bump	12
Charlie's Island	13
Clap-Tag	14
Clerk and Customer	15
Emotional Replay	16
Free Playing: Warm Up Exercise	17
Free Writing	18
Improvised Name Jam	19
Improvising Scenes Through Sounds	20
Krazy Choir	21
Leaving for a Reason	22
Man Overboard (variation)	23
Marching Carnival Line	24
Murder Wink	25
Musical Character Cards	26
Music/Dance Name Game	27
Musical Production (Adaptation of Typewriter)	28
My Fault	29
Name Tennis	30
Objects	31
Percussion Playground	32
Postcards	33
Random Ensembles	34

## Table of Contents

Rhythm Exchange	35
Rhythmical Improvisation	36
Root for Your Fruit (a fun improv for kids)	37
Scream!	38
Send and Receive	39
Shadowing	40
Show Me the Shape of Your World	41
Silent Story	42
Simon Says	43
Soloing	44
Soundscapes	45
Sound Effects	46
Space Jump	47
Statues	48
Sticky Tag	49
Ten Minute Compositions	50
Top 5's	51
Tongue Twisters Tool	52
Umbrella	53
Walking Different Ways	54
What's Your Name?	55
Yes, and...	56
Yes, But...	57
Yes Lets - or Rather Not	58
References	59

## 1-2 Listening Exercise

### What You Need

- A group of two or more
- Noisemakers, instruments or the willingness to use your voice!

### Directions

**Step 1:** Split the participants into groups of 1's and 2's and have them arrange themselves in a circle. Once the groups are established, go around the circle and ask each participant to say their number. Each time the number 1 is said ask every member of group one to repeat their number in unison. Do the same for group two until there is an established rhythm in the circle.

**Step 2:** Keep the rhythm going and ask each participant to clap on their offbeat. For example, all of the participants in group one would clap while all of group two is saying "two."

**Step 3:** Now that there is an established tempo have each participant make a different sound for "1" and "2". For example, instead of saying "one" a participant may chose to say "beep" and instead of saying "two" a participant may say "bop".

**Step 4:** Now that each participant is comfortable with their place as either a 1 or a 2, encourage the participants to try and keep the rhythm while switching between groups one and two. For example, instead of a participant in group one saying: "beep" (bop) "beep" (bop) encourage them to go go 'beep' (pause) 'beep' (pause), etc.

**Contributed by:** Rob Wallace

**Source:** Paraphrased from *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Stevens, John. *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Middlesex: Rock School Limited, 2007.



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## 3 Scenes

### Directions

**Step 1:** The workshop facilitator gives everyone an event (e.g. the Olympics). Divide into three groups. Each group has to come up with 3 different scenes that relate to that event (e.g. speed skating race, getting a medal, news coverage).

**Step 2:** The groups have only one minute to prepare all three scenes. All group members should be involved in each scene.

**Step 3:** Have each group act out their three scenes for the other groups. This activity encourages rapid group cooperation and use of spontaneous ideas.

**Contributed by:** Claire Whitehead

**Source:** [www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/index.html](http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/index.html) adapted from "six episodes"



## Alliterative Name Game

### Directions

This activity works best if the group is sitting in a circle - everyone must be able to see everyone else.

**Step 1:** To begin, ask each student to think of an alliterative adjective matching their name (e.g.: amazing Allan, rambunctious Rob, crazy Caroline). Make sure the adjective is something that they would want associated with their personality!

**Step 2:** Once everyone has chosen the adjective, the group leader should begin by introducing him or herself (e.g.: "Hello, I am Radical Rob.") The challenge of the game is for each participant to be able to repeat the alliterative names of all the participants that came before them. The second person (you may proceed clockwise or counterclockwise) introduces the instructor and then says their own adjective/ name (e.g.: "Hello, this is Radical Rob, and I am Vexed Vikki"). Each subsequent person introduces the leader, then every other member of the group up until their own name. The farther long each person is in the circle, the more names they have to remember. The group leader finishes the game once the circle has been completed, and therefore has to repeat everyone's name in the group.

**Step 3:** Depending on how well the students know each other, you might want to repeat this activity.

**Contributed by:** Rob Wallace

**Source:** unknown



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Alter-Egos

### What You Need

- Pieces of Paper
- Pens

### Directions

**Step 1:** Begin this exercise by talking about censorship in our world. What does it mean to be censored? What types of information are usually censored? Who traditionally censors material? Continue the discussion by addressing the way that we censor ourselves through the negative qualities we associate and the things we tell ourselves.

**Step 2:** After the discussion, provide each participant with a piece of paper and a pen. Ask the participants to write down three ways that they censor themselves. These can be mind sets, beliefs, physical traits, assumption, or fears.

**Step 3:** Once the participants have had time to think of their three criticisms ask them to create an alter-ego and attribute these criticisms to that alter-ego.

**Step 4:** Next, ask the students to create a whole persona for this alter-ego. Where does it live? What does it look like? What does it do? Ask the students to draw a picture of their alter-ego and assign it a name.

**Contributed by:** Matana Roberts  
**Source:** [www.matanaroberts.com](http://www.matanaroberts.com)



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## Arms Game

### Directions

**Step 1:** Select 4 participants to perform a scene.

**Step 2:** Sit two participants in chairs facing the audience. Sit the other two participants behind them on the floor hidden from view.

**Step 3:** The 2 players on the chairs place their arms behind their backs. The 2 players on the floor reach their arms around the person in front of them, keeping their bodies hidden. From the front it must look like the person's own arms.

**Step 4:** The players on the floor make all gestures for the players on the chair. Ask the audience to contribute ideas about where the actors are and what is happening in the scene, or give them an "interview" scenario where one player is interviewing the other.

**Note:** It is useful to ask the players on the floor to imagine their arms are showing the thoughts behind what is being said.

**Source:** Based on the Theatresports © game "Expert Arms" devised by Keith Johnstone. Johnstone, Keith. *Don't be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers*. Calgary: Loose Moose Theatre Company, 1994. 105.



## Balloon Music

### What You Need

- a variety of 11- or 12-inch latex balloons in different colours
- cups of water for all participants

### Directions

**Step 1:** Inflate balloons to 70% or 80% of their capacity. Do not overinflate. This will minimize the risk of popping.

**Step 2:** Moisten fingers using water provided and then rub fingers on balloons to create sounds. Ask participants to experiment with different shapes and explore the different sounds and rhythms that result. For example, tracing an equilateral triangle on the surface of the balloon will yield a triplet if all sides are drawn at a consistent tempo. A square will yield a binary division of the beat (i.e. eighth notes or sixteenth notes).

**Step 3:** Collectively develop a graphic score that consists of different coloured shapes that correspond to the different colours of the balloons as well as the shapes (and resulting rhythms) that are to be drawn on the surface of the balloons.

**An important note of caution:** This exercise works well with children over the age of 6. However, safety precautions must be taken. Before undertaking this exercise, find out if any of the participants has a latex allergy. If so, do not proceed with the activity. It is recommended that the adult facilitators of this exercise inflate all balloons. Children should not be allowed to handle uninflated or broken balloon fragments which are choking hazards. If a balloon pops during the activity, collect and remove all fragments of the broken balloon immediately.

**Contributed by:** Jesse Stewart

**Source:** Matt Edwards and the Balloon Orchestra: [www.myspace.com/balloonorchestra](http://www.myspace.com/balloonorchestra)



## Bippity Bippity Bop

### Directions

**Step 1.** Ask participants to form a circle. Choose 1 participant to be in the centre. They must turn and point at someone in the circle and say “bippity bippity bop”. Before they reach the end of the phrase the person in the circle must say “Bop”. The person in the centre then continues to try to catch people out by suddenly pointing at them. They can also choose to point and say “Bop” instead, in which case the person must not answer. This must be fast and loud. If the person pointed at fails to say the correct answer or stay silent when required, they take the place of the person in the centre.

**Step 2:** Once participants are working well with Phase 1 then teach Phase 2. In Phase 2 the bippity bippity bop continues, with an added feature, shapes. Teach the group a number of 3 person shapes they must make with the person either side of them in the circle. Three examples are “Elephant” (the person in the centre of the group of three puts their right arm over their left and holds their nose with their left hand to make a trunk. The person either side uses both arms to make large ear shapes on the sides of the person in the centre), “Koala” (the person in the centre of the group of three covers their nose with both hands, the person either side uses their hand to make small cups on the centre persons head as ears) or “Surfing” (the person in the centre pretends to surf, standing sideways with arms out, the person either side faces the centre and waves up and down with their hands).

**Step 3:** Once the group knows how to make these shapes (you can make up many others), then the person in the middle of the circle can choose to point at someone and name a shape. They must count down out loud from 5 and the person pointed at, along with the person either side of them in the circle must make the shape. If anyone fails they take the place of the person in the middle of the circle. This takes place along with the Phase 1 of the game so that the circle will not know whether they are going to be asked to say “Bop”, stay silent, or “Bop”, stay silent, or make one of the given shapes.

**Source:** “Bippity, Bippity, Bop”, by The Second City (theatre group). For more information on this influential improvisation group, see [www.secondcity.com](http://www.secondcity.com) and/or Catherine McKnight and Mary Scruggs *The Second City Guide to Improv in the Classroom: Grades K-8: Using Improvisation to Teach Skills and Boost Learning*. San Francisco and Chicago: Jossey-Bass and The Second City, 2008. 56.



## Boom Chicka Boom

### Directions

This exercise is a summer camp staple and it has the merit of being addictive, rhythmic, and fun. Try making up other nonsense phrases to use in this way.

**Step 1:** For a warm up have the participants repeat each phrase after you:

"I said a boom chicka boom"

"I said a boom chicka boom"

"I said a boom a chicka, boom a chicka, rock a chickaboom"

"Booma chicka rocka chicka rocka chicka boom"

"I said alright"

"I said ok"

**Step 2:** Repeat the phrase several times varying the rhythm, timing, and words.

"I said a one more time, the \_\_\_\_\_ way" (insert any sound: e.g. cow way = "I said a moo chicka moo"; e.g. telephone way = "I said a ring chicka ring")

**Step 3:** Repeat again, but this time singing. Have the students try and repeat the notes.

**Contributed by:** Matana Roberts



## Bumpity Bump

### Directions

**Step 1:** All players should be in a circle except one who has volunteered to be in the middle.

**Step 2:** Give the players time to recall (or ask) the names of the people directly on either side of them.

**Step 3:** Once everyone is ready, have the player in the middle go up to someone in the circle and say "(Name) bumpity bump bump bump."

**Step 4:** The player being addressed has to then say the names of the people on either side of him/her before the player in the middle finishes the phrase "bumpity bump bump bump."

**Step 5:** Have the player who was in the middle switch positions with the player who s/he was addressing and repeat.

**Variation:** Musicians could play this game by having the person in the middle play a very short musical phrase instead of saying "bumpity bump bump bump".

**Contributed by:** Khuong Pham

**Source:** [www.improvincyclopedia.org/games//Bumpity\\_Bump\\_.html](http://www.improvincyclopedia.org/games//Bumpity_Bump_.html)



## Charlie's Island

### What You Need

- Any group of improvising musicians

### Directions

**Step 1:** Find some sort of musical idea that will serve as a musical ground or "home-base." This can be a particular rhythm, sonority, concept, or texture arrived at through other improvisatory exercises or through free improvisation.

**Step 2:** Think of this musical ground as an island. Encourage participants to explore the nuances of the island for as long as it is musically interesting.

**Step 3:** After some time has passed, one or more of the inhabitants of the musical island decide to leave by swimming out to sea. Musically, this entails a departure from the musical home-base into new sonic territory. The transition can be cued by one member of the group or felt intuitively. Explore the new musical idea, taking it as far from the island as possible.

**Step 4:** Eventually, participants come to the realization that the sea is too vast and that there is no other land in sight, so they swim back to the original island. However, the musical current has carried them down shore, so the island looks and sounds different to them when they return; they return to the original musical idea with renewed interest and awareness. With this new level of awareness, they explore the musical nuances of the island once again.

**Step 5:** Eventually, the musical inhabitants of the island decide to swim out to sea again, this time in a different musical direction. As before, they take this new idea as far as possible, but as before, they eventually return to the island, again with a renewed musical awareness. The entire process can be repeated for as long as it is musically interesting, yielding a rondo-like musical structure (ABA'CA''D etc). I have found it to be a useful metaphor, particularly when working with inexperienced improvisers.

**Contributed by:** Jesse Stewart

**Source:** David Mott, who learned it from Charlie Mariano



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Clap-Tag

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose 1 person to be “it”. This person must chase and catch other people by touching them.

**Step 2:** Ask half the group to stand around the edges of the room as watchers to make sure no one runs into anything.

**Step 3:** The remaining group and the person who is “it” must close their eyes and keep them closed. The person who is “it” should clap and the rest of the group must clap back. Based on the sound, the person who is “it” must try to move around the room and catch people.

**Step 4:** Once they are caught, people move to the side to join the rest of the watchers.

**Contributed by:** Rebecca Caines

**Source:** Based on a common warm up game.



## Clerk and Customer

### Directions

**Step 1:** Invite two players to volunteer. Choose one to be the clerk of a store and the other to be a customer returning an object. Everyone else forms the audience.

**Step 2:** Ask the customer to leave the room for a minute. Together, the audience and the clerk decide what product the customer should be returning.

**Step 3:** Ask the customer to return to the room and to enter the scene acting as if they are returning some sort of item to the shop. The clerk has to give them hints as to what the item is by asking questions about why they are returning it.

**Step 4:** The aim of the game is for the customer to guess what it is they are returning based on the clues given to them in the scene.

**Hints:** Keep the pace moving quickly so that several players have the chance to take turns being clerk and customer. It doesn't really matter what the object is (or how silly – from a loaf of bread to an elephant). Everyone will be in stitches laughing as the customer tries to discover what he or she is actually returning!

**Contributed by:** Claire Whitehead



## Emotional Replay

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose 4-5 participants to be actors and one participant to be the director.

**Step 2:** Ask the audience or the participants to choose where the scene is and what is taking place. The scene should be very simple.

**Step 3:** The director then suggests ways that the scene could be done differently (example: "it should be sadder," or "it should be angrier," or "it should be underwater," etc.).

**Step 4:** The participants redo the scene following the suggestions made by the director.

**Note:** If there is a large group of participants present, four or five new actors may volunteer to "redo" the scene with the director's new instructions.

**Musical Variation:** This game may be adapted for use with instrumentalists or singers. E.g. have a small group sing a familiar song. Now change the expressive details (sadder, brighter, like a country western 'hurtin' song, like a lullaby, like a love song.)

**Source:** Based on the game "Emotional Changes," devised by Viola Spolin. Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963. 24.



## Free Playing: Warm Up Exercise

### What You Need

- Noisemakers/Instruments

### Directions

Present the group with a box of small instruments and noisemakers (bells, drums, whistles, small percussion, and sound-making toys). Have each participant choose an instrument that they like. Allow the participants some time to become comfortable with their instruments and explore the sounds they can make.

At an appropriate moment, stop the group. Invite everyone to begin playing again. This time, they should listen to the whole group and play “with” everyone else.

Afterwards, compare the two sessions. How is listening to your own instrument in a group different from listening to the whole group?

**Contributed by:** Rob Wallace

**Source:** Paraphrased from *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Stevens, John. *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Middlesex: Rock School Limited, 2007.





# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Free Writing

### What You Need

- Paper
- Pens/pencils

### Directions

**Step 1:** Provide each participant with a piece of paper and a pen.

**Step 2:** Have each participant fold their piece of paper into half twice. There should be four quadrants.

**Step 3:** Give the participants a topic and give them five minutes to fill the first quadrant of their paper with all the words/phrases/sentences that they associate with the topic.

**Step 4:** Now that the participants have an idea of what the exercise is like, do not provide a topic. Instead, explain that this is an opportunity to really let their creativity flow. Again, give the students five minutes to fill their quadrant with words/phrases/sentences.

**Step 5:** Repeat until the paper is filled.

**Contributed by:** Matana Roberts



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## Improvised Name Jam

### What You Need

- Any available instruments, noise makers, and voices

### Directions

**Step 1:** Invite everyone to come together and improvise a song based on people's names. (If people are new to improvising, it might be helpful to have someone play a simple chord progression, such as a 12-bar blues or "Chopsticks".)

**Step 2:** More comfortable improvisers can easily make up a counter melody to embellish the chord progression or add a beat (can be done with clapping and tapping if no drums are available).

**Step 3:** Once you have a groove established, make up verses based on each person's name – the sillier the better! Encourage positive descriptions of the people in the group.

**Contributed by:** University of Guelph Music Students



## Improvising Scenes Through Sounds

### What You Need

- Prepare some slips of paper with short scenarios. (Examples: a) Four people who speak different languages are all trying to ask each other for directions; b) A group of aliens are performing their ceremonial greeting music for the Earthlings.)
- instruments/noisemakers

### Directions

**Step 1:** Divide the participants into small groups of 4-5 and have each group pick a slip of paper out of a hat.

**Step 2:** Give the groups some time (only 1-2 minutes) to discuss the scenarios.

**Step 3:** Now have the group perform an improvisation based on this scenario using instruments, voices, and/or any noise makers.

**Note:** The improvisations don't have to be literal – the scenario is simply meant to be an inspiration for making music.

Created by: Ellen Waterman



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Krazy Choir

### Directions

**Step 1:** Decide on a participant to be the conductor of the choir and have the conductor ask all the participants to choose a song of their choice, but to do so only in their minds. (E.g. everyone chooses a different folk song or Christmas carol.)

**Step 2:** Provide a starting note and ask everyone to begin their songs on that same note.

**Step 3:** Everyone holds to their individual melodies but they only move to the next note of that melody when the conductor signals. That way the whole group is creating unusual sonorities together.

**Note:** The resulting sonorities are amazing even though everyone is simultaneously singing a different song! It is helpful for the conductor to review all cues he or she plans to use so all participants understand; and a demonstration is definitely helpful. An experienced conductor can use this exercise to foster concentration and listening; volunteer conductors from the group will have fun seeing how the choir responds to their cues.

**Variation:** Divide the entire group into two teams, so there are two choirs and two conductors. Have each team take turns being audience or performers.

**Contributed by:** Ellen Waterman

**Source:** Christine Duncan, director of Element Choir. For more information about this extraordinary vocal improviser see <http://www.barnyardrecords.com/bio%20christine.html>



## Leaving for a Reason

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask participants to start moving around the room. Give them a situation or location that they are part of and ask them to act it out (E.g. everyone is in a library).

**Step 2:** Ask everyone to find and act out a different reason to leave one by one. This reason should make sense in the context of the scene.

**Step 3:** The game goes on until everyone has "left" the scene.

**Source:** Based on the Theatresports © game "Leave for the Same Reason," devised by Keith Johnstone. Johnstone, Keith. *Impro for Storytellers*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1998. 169-170.



## Man Overboard (variation)

### Directions

**Step 1:** Everyone spreads out in a staggered line, as in an aerobics class. Then the leader calls one of the following:

- “Land ahoy” - and everyone hops on one foot, doing a salute with one hand
- “Hit the deck” - all down on the floor in a push-up position
- “octopus” - everyone do jumping jacks
- “Man overboard” – everyone finds a partner. One “swims” on the floor as if drowning, the other tries to rescue him or her.
- “Two, Three, Four” - all sit down and start rowing

**Step 2:** Repeat several times, getting faster and faster, and varying the order of the instructions until everyone collapses laughing.

**Contributed by:** Khuong Pham

**Source:** adapted from [www.improvencyclopedia.org/games//Man\\_Overboard.html](http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/games//Man_Overboard.html)



## Marching Carnival Line

### What You Need

- instruments and/or noisemakers

### Directions

**Step 1:** Hand out noise makers (we used silly plastic clappers in the shape of oversized hands) to each participant.

**Step 2:** Establish a marching rhythm on the instruments and noisemakers.

**Step 3:** March and dance in a conga line around the room.

**Step 4:** Give each participant a chance to solo in the line.

**Note:** This exercise can be a great cool down activity or a fun end to a performance. If performing, try marching into the audience and having them join you in the line.

**Created by:** Jane Bunnett and Larry Cramer [www.janebunnett.com](http://www.janebunnett.com)



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Murder Wink

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask everyone to close their eyes. While all eyes are closed, secretly tap 1 person on the shoulder.

**Step 2:** Ask everyone to open their eyes and explain that you have tapped the “murderer” on the shoulder.

**Step 3:** Next, get everyone to walk around in a close group or form a circle. The “murderer” must wink at people, trying to ensure no one but the victim sees the wink.

**Step 4:** When winked at, the person must “die” a dramatic death and fall to the floor.

**Step 5:** The murderer must try to murder as many people as possible before being caught.

**Note:** For young children or participants who might have challenges subtly winking, substitute winking with sticking out their tongues at each other.

**Source:** Based on a common warm up game.



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Musical Character Cards

### What You Need

Create a set of "musical character cards". On each one, put a brief character description (ie: Batman, a horse, a baby, a Martian).

### Directions

**Step 1:** Each person chooses a card to act out using only sounds (no gestures or words).

**Step 2:** Everyone tries to guess the character.

**Variation:** For a very challenging exercise, create story cards based on commonly known fairy tales. Have small groups tell the story using only sounds – no gestures or words. Give the groups time to brainstorm.

**Created by:** University of Guelph Music Students

**Source:** As seen in a workshop for educators by R. Murray Schafer



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## Music/Dance Name Game

**Note:** This game works very well with instruments, but voices and body-percussion also work fine. This game is good not only as a name-game, but as a way to get people thinking and performing on their feet.

### Directions

**Step 1:** Organize the participants into two lines and have those two lines face each other.

**Step 2:** The participant at the beginning of line 1 asks the person directly across from them what their name is and then starts making a silly sound. Keep the sound going.

**Step 3:** In response to the silly sound, the person being addressed says their name while doing a dance-move to accompany the silly sound.

**Step 4:** Repeat until each member of both lines has had a chance to introduce him or herself.

**Note:** Not only is this a good way to learn people's names, but it's also a great way to encourage a rhythmic call and response. If it goes slowly the first time, try repeating the game but ask people to create a flow from one name to the next.

**Contributed by:** Claire Whitehead

**Source:** Variation of a common warm up game.



## Musical Production (Adaptation of Typewriter)

### Directions

**Step 1:** Divide the participants into two groups, or ask for 8 volunteers who will be divided into two teams.

**Step 2:** Ask one participant to be the director of the musical production. The role of the director is to narrate a story (it can be an existing story or one they create on the spot).

**Step 3:** Team 1 acts out the scene while team 2 provides musical accompaniment on instruments or with voices.

**Step 4:** When the director shouts "FREEZE!" both teams swap roles, so that team 2 is now acting, and team 1 is providing musical accompaniment. However, team 2 must take on the roles of the existing characters.

**Source:** Based on the Theatresports © game "Typewriter" devised by Keith Johnstone. See [www.theatresports.org/games](http://www.theatresports.org/games) for information on Theatresports including licensing for hosting competitions. Johnstone, Keith. *Don't be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers*. Calgary: Loose Moose Theatre Company, 1994. 74-78.



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## My Fault

### What You Need

Two sturdy plastic bottles with a small amount of water in them

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have everyone walk around leisurely, and hand two players the bottles. The idea is for each of these players to make eye contact with another player.

**Step 2:** Once a bottle-holder makes eye contact with another player, he or she throws the bottle to that player.

**Step 3:** If at any point the bottle is dropped, both the thrower and the receiver lie down on the floor and repeatedly shout “MY FAULT! MY FAULT! MY FAULT!” as loud as possible until the leader/instructor tells them to stop.

**Step 4:** After that, one of them picks up the bottle and the game continues. Encourage people to take risks – throw the bottle to a player across the room, treat the bottle as though it is red hot, etc.

**Contributed by:** Khuong Pham

**Source:** [www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/My\\_Fault.html](http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/My_Fault.html)



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Name Tennis

### Materials Needed:

A ball or a hacky-sack

### Directions

**Step 1:** Arrange the group in a circle.

**Step 2:** Have one member of the group throw the ball to another member across the circle while saying their name.

**Step 3:** The receiver of the ball begins by saying their own name before throwing the ball to another member.

**Contributed by:** University of Guelph Music Students

**Source:** Common warm-up game



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Objects

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask participants to form a circle.

**Step 2:** Take an actual object (a piece of clothing is easiest e.g. a shoe, a scarf). Place the object in the centre on the floor.

**Step 3:** Ask participants to run into the centre one at a time and pick up the object. Ask them to say "This is not a shoe, this is a [insert new object here]". E.g. "This is not a shoe, this is a boat" (demonstrates sitting on it and rowing).

**Step 4:** They then put the object back and rejoin the circle.

**Variation:** Once people are comfortable, add a second and a third object. (e.g. This is not a shoe, this is my baby; this is not a scarf, this is my baby carriage.)

**Contributed by:** Rebecca Caines

**Source:** Based on the Theatresports © game "Most Uses Of An Object," devised by Keith Johnstone. Johnstone, Keith. *Don't be Prepared: Theatresports for Teachers*. Calgary: Loose Moose Theatre Company, 1994. 116.



## Percussion Playground

### What You Need

- a public playground structure made of metal and/or plastic
- a variety of striking implements, either found or invented

### Directions

**Step 1:** Find or make enough striking implements for all participants. You will need at least two types of strikers: drum sticks and soft mallets. If you cannot secure enough wooden drum sticks for all of the participants, you can use  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch wooden dowels or  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch (inner diameter) rigid PVC electrical conduit cut into 16 inch lengths. For soft mallets, you can use concert bass drum or hard felt gong mallets, or you can construct your own using tennis balls (or similarly sized rubber balls) affixed to the end of wooden or PVC sticks with strong adhesive.

**Step 2:** Once you have created enough striking implements for all participants, find a playground “jungle gym” type structure made of plastic and metal. Encourage participants to make music on the playground structure, treating it as a giant percussion instrument. Ask participants to find as many different sounds as possible. To begin, at least one person should play a consistent rhythmic pattern using a soft mallet on some part of the structure such that it yields a deep, bass drum-like tone (plastic slides often yield such sounds). This will lend some cohesion to the improvisation and give participants (especially younger ones) something to grab onto musically. This foundational rhythmic pattern can be as simple as a steady quarter note pulse or something more syncopated such as a 3-3-2 rhythm (counted **1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2**). Against this rhythmic ground, other participants can superimpose various rhythmic figures as they explore the playground for its sonic potential. This exercise works particularly well with children ages 5 through 10.

Created by: Jesse Stewart



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Postcards

### Directions

**Step 1:** Split participants into groups of 4-5.

**Step 2:** Each group is asked to create a tableau for a postcard" (e. g. Paris, Sydney, a hockey game, the local mall).

**Step 3:** Give the groups a short time (one or two minutes) to plan the ingredients of their postcard (e.g. if the postcard is Paris, one person might be the Eiffel tower, two more might pose as a waiter and a customer at a sidewalk café, another might pretend to be painting the scene).

**Step 4:** Ask each group member to jump into the "picture" one at a time and announce what they are, before freezing in place.

**Step 5:** When the group is in place, ask them to hold their poses and then announce (together) "Welcome to....." the location.

**Advanced variation:** Give the groups no time to prepare or discuss beforehand. Give the location and then immediately ask each group member in turn to jump in.

**Source:** Based on the game "Creating a Stage Picture" by Viola Spolin. Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963. 273.



## Random Ensembles

### What You Need

- paper
- pen
- instruments/noisemakers

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have all the participants write their name on a piece of paper, fold it in half, and place it in a hat.

**Step 2:** Create groups of 4-5 people to perform an improvisation by pulling names out of the hat.

**Step 3:** Have each group play a four minute piece immediately.

**Contributed by:** Ellen Waterman

**Source:** Joe Sorbara



## Rhythm Exchange

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have the group stand in a circle

**Step 2:** Give each participant a particular rhythm or sound.

**Step 3:** Have all the participants start playing their rhythms together.

**Step 4:** When the participants feel comfortable let them know that they can switch their rhythm or sound with another rhythm or sound that they hear in the circle.

Created by: Khuong Pham



## Rhythmical Improvisation

### What You Need

- Instruments – this is a good exercise for introducing improvisation into a school band class.

### Directions

**Step 1:** Begin by giving players tone clusters or certain notes within chords that they can work with.

**Step 2:** Next, have the players explore and improvise rhythms using just the notes you have suggested.

**Step 3:** When the players feel comfortable with the practice move on to blues scales and spend some time exploring.

**Step 4:** Once the players are familiar with the scales, work your way up to modal situations.

**Contributed by:** John Goddard





# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Root for Your Fruit (a fun improv for kids)

### What You Need

- Fruit Shakers
- drums/percussive instruments

### Directions

**Step 1:** Hand out a fruit shaker to each participant.

**Step 2:** On the drums and other percussive instruments establish a groove. Have the participants sing "Root, root, root for your fruit!"

**Step 3:** As the conductor of the group, pick a fruit (ie: Banana). At this point instruct everyone except the bananas to stop playing.

**Step 4:** Repeat until all the fruits have had a turn to shake.

**Created by:** Jane Bunnett and Larry Cramer [www.janebunnett.com](http://www.janebunnett.com)



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# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Scream!

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have the participants walking around the room.

**Step 2:** When the instructor says "go!" each participant must find a partner or a small group and scream at them.

**Step 3:** The group responds by screaming back as loud as they can.

**Step 4:** Once the participants have had some time to scream at their partner, the instructor says "stop!" and the participants go on walking.

**Step 5:** Repeat.

Created by: Khuong Pham



## Send and Receive

**Note:** This is a game that focuses on close listening and concentration. The object of this game is to keep the sounds circulating, and also to explore the directionality of sound.

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have the participants arrange themselves in a circle and ask them to close their eyes.

**Step 2:** Each participant may choose to be either a sender or a receiver (and may change roles at any time during the game). To send a sound, make a repeating sound and direct it towards a specific part of the circle (e.g. 'beep beep beep beep beep'). To receive a sound, simply listen.

**Step 3:** If you feel like a sound is being 'sent' to you, then repeat it immediately and direct it to a different part of the circle.

**Step 4:** If you are sending a sound, stop as soon as you hear that it has been received. You can direct a sound by turning your head or taking a step out into the circle.

**Step 5:** Anyone can decide to become a 'sender' at any time and introduce a new sound into the game.

**Contributed by:** Ellen Waterman

**Source:** Oliveros, Pauline. "Sonic Meditation III-Telepathic Improvisation." *Sonic Meditations*. Baltimore, Maryland: Smith Publications, 1971.



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Shadowing

### Directions

**Step 1:** Two teams of two players are created. Two of the players act out a scene together.

**Step 2:** The other two players act as the “shadows” of other players. They are to be the actors’ consciences and to make comments or suggestions about what their partner is doing.

**Note:** This activity encourages creativity by including both passive and active improvisational roles.

**Musical Variations:** One or both teams could play music instead of acting out a scene. For example, team ‘a’ improvise together, while the members of team ‘b’ comment musically on what the members of team ‘a’ are playing. Alternatively, have team ‘a’ act out the scene, ask team ‘b’ to provide background music for each actor. The shadowing musicians should express the emotional intentions of the actors.

**Source:** A variation of the exercise “Shadowing”, devised by Viola Spolin. Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963. 177.





# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Show Me the Shape of Your World

### What You Need

- A piece of paper
- Pens

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask each participant to pick a shape that represents their world and incorporate that shape in a picture.

**Step 2:** After giving each participant time to draw their shapes ask each participant to share their shape with the group.

**Step 3:** In a group discuss what the different shapes represent and how those representations operate in their world.

**Contributed by:** Matana Roberts



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# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Silent Story

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask participants to form a circle. Ask one person to make a silent motion (E.g. dropping something).

**Step 2:** Ask the next person to their right to make a silent motion in reaction to that one (E.g. picking it up and using it).

**Step 3:** Continue around the circle. A "silent story" is made through silent actions and reactions around the circle.

**Musical variation:** 'tell' a story without using words. The first player creates a phrase or part of a phrase, the next player 'picks it up' and continues the phrase. Create a narrative musical line (with dynamic curves, points of tension, and cadences). Encourage the players not to leave gaps between the phrases – even their silences should add to the musical 'story'.

**Contributed by:** University of Guelph Music Students



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Simon Says

### Directions

This is a sound variation of the traditional children's game, with a twist: sounds are directed to particular people.

**Step 1:** A player begins by making a sound and passing it off with their right hand to another player. That player then has to repeat the sound exactly and pass it off again.

**Step 2:** If the player passes the sound with their left hand however, the receiving player must change the sound and then pass that sound on. Participants need to be very attentive for this game!

**Contributor:** Adam Malcolm

**Source:** Variation of traditional children's game



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Soloing

### Directions

**Step 1:** Go around the circle and establish a tempo using '1' and '2'.

**Step 2:** Once a tempo is established ask each student to choose a different sound to make instead of saying '1' and '2' (ie: Boom and Bam). Now there should be an established groove with an array of different sounds.

**Step 3:** Explain the importance of the group's ability to keep this tempo steady and consistent.

**Step 4:** Next, go around the circle and give each participant an opportunity to solo overtop of the group's rhythm.

**Note:** For this exercise it is important to emphasize the importance of the relationship between the ensemble and the soloist. Tell the students that they can solo for as long as they want as long as they are being respectful of their fellow musicians.

**Contributed by:** Rob Wallace

**Source:** Paraphrased from *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Stevens, John. *Search and Reflect: A Music Workshop Handbook*. Middlesex: Rock School Limited, 2007.





# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Soundscapes

**Note:** This game works best with teams of 5-6 people.

### Directions

**Step 1:** Divide participants into groups of 5-6 members and give each group one minute to agree on a soundscape they want to create (e.g. a carnival, the doctor's office, a coffee shop).

**Step 2:** Each group gets to stand up and perform their soundscape for everyone, using only sounds not actions. Sounds may include anything you would find in that location; for example, a doctor's office might have phones ringing, a nurse announcing the next patient, people coughing or moaning, a baby crying, etc.

**Step 3:** Audience members put up their hands when they have guessed the location of the soundscape.

**Step 4:** If you play a second round, encourage each group to think about things like the density of sounds, which ones are in the foreground, middle ground, background. Make the soundscape as realistic as possible.

**Contributed by:** University of Guelph Music Students



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# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Sound Effects

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose two participants to perform a scene. They are allowed to speak but cannot make other sounds.

**Step 2:** Choose two other participants to provide sound effects for the performers' actions. They can lead the actors into a sound effect or the actors can prompt the sound effect by an action or activity. Everyone else forms the audience.

**Note:** The idea is that the sound effects participants add to the scene, not merely support it.

**Source:** [www.improvincyclopedia.org/games/index.html](http://www.improvincyclopedia.org/games/index.html) adapted from "Sound Effects"



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Space Jump

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask the group to form a circle.

**Step 2:** Choose 1 participant and ask them to stand in the centre.

**Step 3:** Ask the audience to choose what action the participant must act out (e.g. wrestling with a crocodile).

**Step 4:** When they are in an interesting physical position, the leader calls "Space Jump" and the participant freezes in place. A second person goes into the circle, looks at the position the person is frozen in and chooses a different scene they could be in. (e.g. a model shoot)

**Step 5:** Based on the suggested position the 2 participants then act out this new scene and then the leader calls "Space Jump" again and a 3rd person joins in and changes the scene again. (e.g. World War I soldiers struggling through the mud)

**Step 6:** This continues until 5 people are acting out a scene in the centre. When "Space Jump" is called for the 6th time, the last person goes out of the circle and the group must revert back to the previous 4 person activity.

**Step 7:** This continues through all the previous scenes until the first person is alone in the circle back where the scene started.

**Source:** Based on the "Freeze Tag" game series popularized by The Second City (Chicago-based theatre group), Improv Olympic (US theatre group), Improcorp (Australian theatre group) and TV shows such as "Whose Line is it Anyway". For more information about influential founders of Improv Olympic, Del Close and Charna Halpern see [www.chicago.ioimprov.com/about/about](http://www.chicago.ioimprov.com/about/about).



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Statues

### Directions

**Step 1:** Divide the group into pairs.

**Step 2:** Ask each pair to choose who will be the sculptor and who will be the statue. The sculptor “moulds” the body of the statue into positions. The statue is pliable and holds the positions he or she is moved into.

**Step 3:** Leaders can allocate emotions or scenarios to each pair and the statues must reflect that emotion or scenario, or they can let the pairs choose their own positions.

**Step 4:** Allow time for the group to see each others' statues. Switch the sculptor and statue and repeat.

**Contributed by:** University of Guelph Music Students based on a common warm-up game



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Sticky Tag

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose 1 person to be “it”. This person must chase and catch other people by touching them.

**Step 2:** Once they catch someone, that person is “stuck” to the chaser by that hand, and must run around with them catching people with their free hand, until everyone has been caught and “stuck”.

**Step 3:** The line of people that forms must stay “stuck” to each other and work together to tag other people.

**Contributed by:** Rebecca Caines

**Source:** Based on a common warm up game.



## Ten Minute Compositions

### What You Need

- pencils
- paper
- instruments

### Directions

**Step 1:** Invite each participant to spend no more than 10 minutes coming up with directions for a guided improvisation. Text instructions and graphic scores are both good strategies for this activity.

**Step 2:** Have the group play the pieces either as a whole, or in smaller groups like duos and trios.

**Note:** The idea behind such a short 'composition' time is to put the focus on experimenting and process rather than on perfecting a script. Try collecting all the 10-minute compositions created by a group (a class, an ensemble) over a term. The resulting "score" is a great reminder to the group of the work they've done together.

Created by: Ellen Waterman



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Top 5's

### What You Need

- Paper
- Pens

### Directions

**Step 1:** Provide each participant with a piece of paper and have them fold the paper in two.

**Step 2:** On one side of the paper ask each participant to write the top five things that they like about themselves.

**Step 3:** On the other side of the paper ask each participant to write the top five things that they dislike about themselves.

**Step 4:** Have each participant share their top fives with the group. Call attention to how the perceived negative qualities may be helpful in certain circumstances. (E.g. a tendency to get angry easily might also be viewed as the ability to stand up for oneself.)

**Contributed by:** Matana Roberts



## Tongue Twisters Tool

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask participants to form a circle.

**Step 2:** Select a participant to be first and instruct them to say: "one smart fella HE felt smart." This is only said at the start of the round.

**Step 3:** Next person says "TWO smart fellas THEY felt smart."  
This is said on any number that DOES NOT have a 3 in it or a multiple of 3 (i.e. 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 14 etc.).

**Step 4:** The next person in the circle must say "THREE smart fellas THEY ALL felt smart". This is said on any number that DOES HAVE a 3 in it or a multiple of 3 (i.e. 3, 6, 9, 12, and 13 also, 15 etc.).

**Note:** If anyone incorrectly says the phrase (i.e. TWO smart fellas THEY ALL felt smart) that person is out and the game recommences.

Before you know it, the game becomes a tongue twister. For example: One smart smeller he smelt smart.

**Source:** [www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/index.html](http://www.improvencyclopedia.org/games/index.html) adapted from "Smart Fellas"



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Umbrella

### What You Need

- An umbrella

### Directions

**Step 1:** The umbrella is a very useful tool for conducting in improvisation workshops. Kids find it very clear and colourful, and it's easy to see.

**Step 2:** It is best to use the umbrella as a tool for letting participants know when to start and stop playing but it can also be used as an indicator of volume or tempo (by varying how far you open the umbrella and the speed at which you do so).

**Step 3:** When the Umbrella is open it is 'raining music' and the participants should play lively and freely.

**Step 4:** When the Umbrella is closed the participants should stop playing.

**Created by:** Jane Bunnett and Larry Cramer [www.janebunnett.com](http://www.janebunnett.com)



## Walking Different Ways

### Directions

**Step 1:** Get the group to walk around the room, not talking or making eye contact. (A good way to stop collisions is to ask them to keep finding an empty space on the floor to walk into).

**Step 2:** Ask them to walk in a hurry, stop suddenly at traffic lights or the edge of a cliff, walk as if they were happy, sad, angry, heavy, light, bored, an alien, avoiding traps, swimming through custard, on the moon, etc.

**Step 3:** Ask them to walk with their eyes closed (slowly, exploring the space).

**Step 4:** Next, have them crawl, slither, walk on their toes, dance, run.

**Step 5:** Count slowly from 1-10. Get them to walk slowly at count of 1, through to running at count of 10. Start to say different numbers between 1 and 10 and ask them to return to that speed immediately when you say the number.

**Contributed by:** Rebecca Caines

**Source:** Based on a common warm up game.



## What's Your Name?

### Directions

**Step 1:** Have the group establish an up-tempo groove on their instruments.

**Step 2:** Next, start singing "what's your name!?"

**Step 3:** Following the rhythm point to a participant. Ask them to say their name and join you in singing.

**Step 4:** Repeat until all participants are singing.

**Note:** This activity is a great icebreaker.

**Created by:** Jane Bunnett and Larry Cramer [www.janebunnett.com](http://www.janebunnett.com)



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Yes, and...

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose 2 participants. Ask one to be the Questioner and the other to be the Answerer.

**Step 2:** Ask the Questioner to start asking questions about the scene that the Answerer could potentially answer with a yes or no.

**Step 3:** The Answerer must answer every question with "Yes, and..." accepting the offer for what can happen in the scene and building off it to develop the story.

**Step 4:** Both characters must act out the scene as it develops and should try to keep it going as long as possible.

**Source:** Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Johnstone, Keith. *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979. 103



# Tools for Teaching Improvisation

## Yes, But...

### Directions

**Step 1:** Choose 2 participants. Ask one to be the Questioner and the other to be the Answerer.

**Step 2:** Ask the Questioner to start asking questions about the scene that the Answerer could potentially answer with a yes or no.

**Step 3:** The Answerer must answer every question with "Yes, but..." inserting any excuse to try and block the scene from going further, whilst also making up more details on the spot about what is going on.

**Step 4:** The questions should build off each other to let you know what is happening. (E.g. Question: "Are you Open?" Answer: "Yes, but we have a power cut and you won't be able to see much." Question: "Are you alone in the shop?" Answer: "Yes, but my pet alligator is with me.")

**Step 5:** Ask them to try to keep the scene going as long as possible and to act it out as they go along.

**Source:** Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Johnstone, Keith. *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979. 103



## Yes Lets - or Rather Not

### Directions

**Step 1:** Ask participants to form a circle.

**Step 2:** One participant suggests a location e.g. a beach and another participant suggests an action. All the participants that like the action yell: "Yes, Let's do that!" and start doing the action. Whoever does not like the suggestion steps out and/or sits down. The game continues until there is only one participant is left.

**Note:** Attitude is important for this one:

- Participants should not feel inhibited to step out, i.e. they should not feel that they are not accepting.
- Participants should not feel rejected when others step out. The goal is to learn about which suggestions make others happy.

**Source:** [www.improvincyclopedia.org/games/index.html](http://www.improvincyclopedia.org/games/index.html) adapted from "Yes Lets - or Rather Not"



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## Improvisation and At Risk Youth

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