

# APPLIED Improvisation IN YOUR CLASSROOM

BY WILL DENNIS



When most people hear the word “improv,” they scan the room for the nearest exit. Their backs start sweating and they fight the urge to throw up.

However, the very same principles that helped make comedic stars out of the likes of Tina Fey, Keegan-Michael Key and Robin Williams can completely alter your classroom.



Here are just three of the many tenets from improv that you can start using immediately in your classroom:

### Yes, and...

This is the golden rule of improv.

This simple phrase is the building block for all creation. At its core, it is about acceptance and contribution. To improvise (that is, to create collaboratively) the first step is to accept: accept a suggestion, accept an offer from a teammate. Most importantly (and this can help tremendously with creating safe spaces), acceptance refers to the acceptance of one another as human beings with dignity. If we do not see our teams as worthy of acceptance, we will never embrace the possibilities of creating alongside one another.

The second, and equally important part of the phrase is “and.” This is the contribution part of the equation. It is not merely enough to say yes; to accept. We must be willing to participate in the process and the creation by contributing something of our own.

When “yes, and” happens, creation thrives.

### Try this!

#### Activity: Let's Build

**Round One:** teacher is a developer who needs help building a new iPhone app

- Students are in pairs
- Player 1 offers the first idea for an app
- They go back and forth for 60 seconds. Everything after the first idea must begin with the word “no.”

**Round Two:** teacher is a movie developer for Miramax

- This round, player 2 begins with an idea for the movie
- Teams go back and forth for 45 seconds, everything after the first idea must begin with “yes, but...”

**Round Three:** teacher is a roller coaster designer for Six Flags

- Player 1 begins again
- Everything after the first idea begins with “yes, and...”

#### Make Your Team Look Good

The biggest roadblock to creativity is self-judgment. Think of the countless times a hand goes up in any classroom and the first thing said is, “this is dumb, but...” or “this is probably wrong, but...” We qualify

so much of what we say out of fear that we might be brilliant.

After 20- plus years of Catholic education and improvising, I've learned that the best way to remove self-judgment is to focus on others.

The more I put my energy into making those around me look good, the less time I spend thinking about my bushy eyebrows, my Napoleon complex and my imposter syndrome. (Now, I can save these things for 3 AM when I'm inexplicably wide-awake, journeying through all of my anxieties.)

### Mistakes are fumbles and fumbles are opportunities

There are a few things about this tenet that make it my favorite:

- *The football analogy.* When someone fumbles the ball in football, every eligible human on the field pounces on the ball and fights to recover it. I have yet to see a football game where a ball gets fumbled and the teams scream in terror, or run the other way, or (better yet) ignore it and hope that it will just disappear. No. A fumble is an opportunity.
- *The word fumble.* "Fumble" has a connotation that is less permanent than "mistake." This is important for young people in developing a growth mindset.
- *The collective nature of opportunities.* For those educators who embrace a social and emotional learning (SEL) based curriculum, understanding that our mistakes might feel enormous to us, but can be a gift to someone else, and can help build the core competencies of relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, self-management and responsible decision-making.

### Game Break! Here's a game you can use in your classroom as soon as today.

#### Let's Play: Dr. Know It All

- Three to four players and one host (helpful if host is the teacher). The players stand shoulder to shoulder at the front of the room facing the "audience."
- Dr. Know-It-All is an expert in something people aren't typically experts in (e.g., fried pickles, polka dots) and is a guest on a talk show.
- Dr. Know-It-All is ONE person/entity, made up of three or four individuals; as such, they must answer questions one word per player at a time.



- The host will first ask a few questions, then turn it over to the audience for any questions. Always begin each answer with the person at the beginning of the line, not where the last answer left off.

Some tips:

- Remember, no mistakes: don't stop and apologize if you say two words by accident... no one cares!
- Every answer is the correct answer because there is only one expert in the room. The host should help direct even the silliest answers in the direction of impressive expertise.
- Think less. Instincts will want to have you wait for the perfect word—it doesn't exist. Your job is to accept the word before you and then contribute your own word: listen and react.
- As a player, take it seriously (it allows the rest of the class to laugh more and enjoy). Remember this is what you've devoted your life to studying, so you'll answer with complete confidence... one word at a time :).

These three tenets are merely a sampling. There are so many more elements of improv that can be used within the classroom to create environments of acceptance, differentiate learning, cultivate growth mindsets, reinforce Christian communities and engage students in social and emotional learning.

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