LESSONS FROM IMPROV THEATER

Applying Improvisational Concepts and Techniques to LIS

By Jay Edwards

ABSTRACT

This article explores improv theater concepts and techniques that are relevant to LIS and can be integrated into student training and librarian workshops. Some LIS literature applies these practices directly to library contexts. Substantial research exists in applying improvisation to three general areas: 1) collaboration and teamwork, 2) interacting with patrons and customers, and 3) teaching and instruction. Further research is needed in applying improvisational concepts to two LIS-specific areas: reference and information literacy.

IMPROVISATION IN THE LIBRARY?

Any time a patron walks through the door or messages the library online, the unpredictable can happen. No matter how well we plan, think out, and organize our day, there will still be some moments we will not see coming. Such moments enter our libraries in the form of patrons and users, manage our libraries in the form of staff and coworkers, and encroach upon our libraries in the form of ever-shifting technologies, budgets and environments. Even a routine conversation can suddenly go in an unfamiliar direction. We all improvise every day.

In general, improvisation refers to "creativity, adaptation and innovation under time pressure" (Ratten and Hodge 2016, 149). It can be thought of as "making do" with the resources that are available, while "letting go" of preconceived notions in order to move forward (Seham 2001, xx). Improvisational theater, also called improvisational comedy, Improv (US) or Impro (UK), entails performing without a script. This may be in the form of competitive games with increasingly absurd rules, structured formats that guide the direction of the narrative, or entirely free and unrestricted play. Improvisational traditions exist in music, dance and extemporaneous speaking. Unlike these forms, however, improv theater requires no special skills: only a common language and willingness to participate. This makes it a particularly accessible and flexible gateway to improvisational practice.

This article will explore how professional development activities derived from improv can enhance library and information services (LIS) in five areas: collaboration and teamwork; patron and user services; reference; instruction; and information literacy. Improv is not just a metaphor for good librarianship, but a practical set of skills and techniques we can immediately apply to all kinds of librarianship, as well as a repertoire of activities and exercises to train, practice and analyze those skills (Stamatoplos 2009).

THE CASE FOR IMPROV IN LIBRARIES

Jacqueline Donaldson Doyle (1996) describes improv as a metaphor for librarians successfully adapting to changing library landscape. Doyle identifies courage, creativity, and timely, effective response as critical attributes for librarians facing changing resources, technology and user expectations. Felix T. Chu (2007) discusses improvisation as one of several avenues of research relevant to practicing librarians and wondered whether improv might provide practical concepts and principles that could be "articulated and learned" and applied especially to reference work.

Anthony Stamatoplos (2009, 2015, 2019) approaches improv not just as a metaphor, but as a set of practical applications focusing on agreement, awareness, making connections, showing vs telling, and trust. In 2010, Stamatoplos worked with Edward Trout, director of ComedySportz (Indianapolis, IN), to develop exercises for building skills for information literacy instruction, such as paying attention, acceptance, teamwork, commitment and having fun.

Cathy Belben (2010) identifies improvisation as a set of skills, including "thinking quickly, forgetting inhibitions, having fun, and interacting positively with others," that enhance librarians' interactions with the public,

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/329548

especially with teens (16). Jill Markgraf (2015) runs a blog on applying improv techniques in libraries, with a list of improv games to help librarians develop skills in leadership, planning, reference, teaching and teambuilding. Jennifer Laredo, Melissa Maglio and Heidi Murphy (2016) report using improvisation workshops and techniques to boost customer service skills among their library's employees.

Kate Dohe and Erin Pappas (2016, 2017a, 2017b) have developed a series of workshops for librarians focusing on collaboration and outreach. Inspired by Dohe and Pappas, Allison Hosier (2019) began attending improv workshops for teachers in New York and found immediate benefits in her approach to teaching information literacy.

INTRO TO IMPROV

The fundamental concept of improv is the rhetorical formula, "yes, and," which guides a back-and-forth dialogue between two or more people (Alda 2017, Frost and Yarrow 2016, Johnstone 1979, Kulhan & Crisafulli 2017, Seham 2001, Wasson 2017). An example of "yes, and" would look like this:

> A: Do you want to go to the movies?
> B: Yes, and let's go off our diets and eat a lot of greasy popcorn.
> OR
> B: Yes, let's sneak out of the house through the basement.
> (Halpern, Close and Johnson 1994, 47)

Even when the participants do not literally utter the words "yes, and," this phrase guides improvisational dialogue:

> Sarah: This is a picture of me and my mum.
> James: Oh, that's too cute! How old are you here?
> Sarah: About five. It's my first day at school.
> (Salinsky and Frances-White 2017, 245)

"Yes" represents the perception and acceptance of incoming information; it creates affirmation and establishes a shared reality between participants. On the other hand, saying "no" or rejecting a participant's information would disrupt the process of collaboration, halting forward momentum and requiring all participants to backtrack and start over. This part of the "yes, and" process recognizes all contributions as valid and establishes a platform necessary to move on to the next step.

The second and equally important component is "and," which signals the contribution of additional information. This is not the introduction of just any information, such as tangential details or non-sequiturs, but a specific response that builds on and expands the information previously accepted. This second component of "yes, and" ensures active participation within the creative process, rather than simple observation.

When two or more people are active in this receive-respond process, they can generate, explore, and expand upon ideas in new and surprising ways. Sawyer (2004) names this phenomenon "collaborative emergence" (13), in which no one person is in charge of the direction or outcome, and the new ideas that develop from the process prevent the outcome from being predicted in advance. But even though each improv session is new and unpredictable, the skills that lead to successful improv can be developed and enhanced over time. Workshops and classes that include "yes, and" activities can build such skills.

1) COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

Since improv theater's beginnings in the mid-1950s, and especially within the last few decades, improv performers and teachers have found ways to apply improvisational methods to corporate training (Ratten and Hodge 2016). This new product, termed "applied improvisation," sees teams of teachers traveling to business sites across the country to hold workshops that build employees' skills in areas such as communication and teamwork. These workshops' activities build trust, openness, and agreement between teammates, both among employees and between the organization and its wider community. Although these workshop activities are derived from improv theater, they rarely involve performing in front of an audience. Instead, as Belben (2010) describes, group activities are typically low-risk, low-anxiety and "designed to get participants to feel less self-conscious and more comfortable with each other" (16).

Dohe and Pappas (2017a) have developed workshops geared specifically toward librarians that explore de-centering (putting ego aside to work with others), building ensemble and support, creating meaningful contributions, communicating, and learning to view failures as challenges and opportunities. Workshop activities give participants practice in supporting and respecting each other and their choices, helping each other succeed, and "mak[ing] your partner look good" (p. 3). Similarly, participants learn to trust each other and know that the other person will support them.

Although applying improv to teamwork has numerous benefits, many authors have also pointed out the limitations of improvisation. According to Dohe and Pappas (2016), improvisation takes place in a "creative space" in which ideas are allowed to flow freely, as opposed to an "implementation space" in which ideas must adapt to outside constraints. The creative space is a good place to practice specific skills, but participants must still understand the importance of practices outside the creative space, such as developing and internalizing shared values and ethics (Evans and Christie 2017), reflection and feedback (Reale 2017), and equity and inclusiveness for all voices (Seham 2001).

2) USER SERVICES

The improv-based training industry also applies improvisation to the relationships between employees and customers, patrons and users (Robson, Pitt & Berthon, 2015). In the library realm, this kind of professional development focuses on improving and exploring how public-facing library employees, including para-professional staff and student employees, interact with customers or library users. These workshops break down one-on-one interactions into component parts: active listening, spontaneity, avoidance of preconceptions, self-awareness (such as tone of voice, facial expressions and body posture), verbal communication, and so on.

Doyle (1996) recognizes that improvisational training "has value

[for participants] whether or not they're working with a script because it helps them stay in the moment, to be spontaneous and responsive" (78). Activities that require participants to listen closely to each other enhance their awareness of others, including library patrons. Participants gain practice in staying in the moment, focusing on the issue at hand, thinking flexibly, and avoiding preconceived ideas of what a user may want.

Los Gatos, CA librarians Laredo, Maglio and Murphy (2016) recruited an improv teacher to help their staff develop customer service skills in the face of growing demand for library services. After their improv training, Los Gatos staff continued to incorporate role-play elements into their regular meetings, which are a safe and analytic environment where they can try out various responses to potential patron interactions. Even though not all employees take part in the role-play scenarios, all employees are engaged in debrief conversations held immediately afterward, where they are more comfortable participating.

3) REFERENCE

Improvisational concepts can apply not only to basic customer service but directly to the reference interview. Taylor (1968) considers the reference interview one of the "most complex acts of communication" (180). Indeed, the reference interview is highly improvisational, as a librarian attempts to find out what information a patron needs (which is often hard to define), and helps them find that information. The process, according to Cassell and Hiremath (2018), means that "librarians must learn to improvise like expert jazz musicians" (15).

Dohe and Pappas (2017b) link the reference interview to the process of "yes, and," pointing out that every step involves "drawing out the thread of a workable idea… moving an idea forward [and] shaping it into something manageable" (424). The process begins when a user approaches a librarian and asks a question. The librarian accepts the user's question, then provides a response that includes information or solicits clarifying information from the user. Although the user may not be aware of improv history or improv techniques, their response is part of the give-and-take process: they receive the librarian's response and respond with answers, feedback, or additional information of their own. In an effective reference interview, each turn provides additional information, such as a deeper understanding of the user's information need or an answer that meets their need.

This does not mean every turn must head in the same direction. Users may need to backtrack if they realize they're going off course as they attempt to articulate their needs. And librarians must be willing to let go of previous assumptions when they receive new information from users. In some cases, librarians may need to tell users that the information they need is not immediately accessible, or that a search did not retrieve relevant answers. Rather than giving up and sending the user away empty-handed, the librarian can offer alternative access or perform different searches. Although the words "yes, and" are not always expressed literally, the concepts of affirmation and contribution are still applicable and significant to a successful reference transaction.

Librarians and library schools have struggled to "replicate the immediacy and spontaneity of the reference interview" in the "artificial environment" of the classroom (Saunders and Ung 2017, 50). But activities derived from improv can create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity in a systematic way. To begin, components of the reference interview can be identified, broken down and rehearsed. The RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers (American Library Association 2008) lists attributes necessary for a successful interview, such as engagement, focusing attention, verbal and nonverbal communication, listening skills, and encouragement. Jennerich and Jennerich (1997) identify twelve major skills needed in the reference interview, including eye contact, avoiding premature diagnosis, reflecting feelings verbally, and restating or paraphrasing content. These are concepts frequently undertaken in improv workshops and rehearsals, using activities, games and discussions to target and strengthen confidence and ability. Later, after participants are comfortable with the elements of interpersonal communication, further workshops can include role-playing scenarios based on real-world patron inquiries.

4) INSTRUCTION

Sawyer (2004) explores the frequently cited metaphor of teaching as a scripted performance but concludes that teaching is best approached as an improvisational performance, in which teachers collaborate with students to generate educational play. The Association of American Colleges & Universities emphasizes active, collaborative learning as opposed to the lecture-based methods typically used in library instruction sessions (Kuh and Schneider 2008). As the trend toward active learning grows, library instruction is likely to focus more on collaborative activities, group discussions, and even student-led learning, and we should therefore expect that improvisational skills for librarians will become even more valuable.

Effective teaching requires a balance between structure and freedom. In a study for the Improvisation in Teacher Education (IMTE) project in Norway, Aadland, Espeland, and Arnesen (2017) found no contradiction between the use of scripts and improvisation. Teachers frequently alter, manipulate and make minor adjustments to their lesson plans to accommodate various student needs and various circumstances. Teachers also employ a repertoire of examples and explanations, mixing and matching them to suit the situation. In addition, they identify and act upon "teachable moments," opportunities to highlight, explain and reinforce concepts and skills.

Teachers gain valuable experience in the classroom, but they can hone and analyze their skills using improv techniques, which "can help librarians be flexible and respond creatively in the classroom" (Stamatoplos and Trout 2010, 195). Lobman (2011) argues that improv "provides teachers with a

concrete way of being playful with the scripts of schooling while including students as active participants in creating the environment of the classroom" (75). Both Stamatoplos (2019) and Hosier (2019) report that improv training has enhanced their performance in the library classroom.

5) INFORMATION LITERACY

No literature explores the relationship between improvisation and information literacy, but Lenters and Whitford (2008) and Howard et al. (2017) both demonstrate a strong link between active, collaborative learning and language literacy skills, as students are able to apply previous knowledge with a creative outlet. The most effective learning for students happens "in an open, improvisational fashion," where learners are allowed to "experiment, interact, and participate" with each other and the material (Sawyer 2004, 14). Limited time is a major challenge in an information classroom, with little time left for the active, collaborative learning that fosters creativity, curiosity and play. In fact, Hensley, Arp and Woodard (2014) suggest that in-depth information literacy education might be better left to one-on-one instruction so that group sessions can be devoted to creative pursuits.

With regard to information retrieval, it might be helpful to apply the "yes, and" formula to interactions between a user and a database. When the user enters search terms into a database, the system accepts that information and responds with information on its own: the number of results, a list of results with methods of accessing them, and suggested subject terms and other bibliographic information. The user then accepts the information from the database and responds with additional information, this time in the form of item selection, filter selection or clarifying information, such as additional or alternate search terms.

A student's experience with information searching is necessarily slower and less immediate than in-person improvisation and can be more self-reflective and considered. However, several improvisational skills, such as adaptability, collaboration, creativity, flexibility, and an open mind are useful learning goals for information-literate learners (American Library Association 2015). Students must practice awareness when viewing search results, looking for information that explains why those results appeared. They must have the "mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues" when the results are unsatisfactory (22). They must learn how to manipulate the database's search tools and become comfortable "playing with" interfaces and new methods of searching. They must also learn to trust others (namely, librarians) enough to ask for help, and eventually learn to support and encourage other users in their searches for information. Beyond language literacy and information literacy, these skills are also applicable to metaliteracy skills, such as digital literacy, digital collaboration and adaptation to ever-evolving technology and information landscapes (Mackey and Jacobson 2014).

CONCLUSION

What role does improv have in librarianship? Just like any other skill, such as doing arithmetic or playing an instrument, interpersonal skills take practice. Although one can read theory, history, commentary, and advice regarding the skill, the best and most reliable method of improving is to do it.

Every major city will have one or more institutions dedicated to improv theater. Such theaters typically feature shows, workshops, and classes, as well as teachers who will travel for corporate or non-profit workshops. Smaller libraries may want to inquire about an improviser's rates for non-profit institutions. Public libraries may also consider booking public workshops and shows in addition to a staff workshop.

However, workshops are not the only way for individuals and groups to build improvisational skills. A wide variety of board games, card games and role-playing games combine structured sets of rules with freedom and play and provide various levels of interpersonal interaction. Library board game events are an excellent opportunity for librarians and community members to practice awareness, flexibility, and other improvisational skills, even if they are not branded as "improv."

The central concept underlying improv is "yes, and," which entails receiving and responding to information positively. This has multiple applications in library services. According to current research on improv theory and improv-based training, "yes, and" enhances team building, user interactions, and teaching. However, no qualitative or quantitative studies have been undertaken to examine the precise effects of improv training on library performance, especially the reference interview, or on the application of improvisational concepts to information literacy instructions. Given the potential benefits, further research in this area would be worthwhile and informative.

Jay Edwards is the Circulation Supervisor at the University of Oklahoma libraries.

REFERENCES

Aadland, Helga, Magne Espeland, and Trond Egil Arnesen. "Towards a Typology of Improvisation as a Professional Teaching Skill: Implications for Pre-service Teacher Education Programmes." *Cogent Education* 4, no. 1 (2017): 14.

American Library Association. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." 2015. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework

American Library Association. "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers." 2008. http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral

Alda, Alan. *If I understood you, would I have this look on my face?: my adventures in the art and science of relating and communicating*. New York: Random House, 2017.

Belben, Cathy. "YES, Indeed! Improv and the Art of Library Science." *Library Media Connection* 29, no. 2 (2010): 16-17. http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=afh&AN=55094304&site=ehost-live

Cassell, Kay Ann., and Hiremath, Uma. *Reference and Information Services : An Introduction*. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2018.

Chu, Felix. "Bridging the LIS-Practitioner Gap: Some Frames for Research." *Library Philosophy and Practice* 2, (2007).

Dohe, Kate, and Erin Pappas. "Lessons From the Field: What Improv Teaches Us About Collaboration." *Library Leadership & Management (Online)* 32, no. 1 (2017): 1-16. https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/docview/1966065804?accountid=12964

Dohe, Kate, and Erin Pappas. "The Many Flavors of "yes": Libraries, Collaboration, and Improv." *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 8 (2017): 422. DOI: 10.5860/crln.78.8.422

Dohe, Kate, and Erin Pappas. "Starting with "Yes, And…": Collaborative Instructional Design in Digital Scholarship." *Proceedings of the Library Orientation Exchange (LOEX) National Conference* (2016). https://doi.org/10.13016/M2QV3C52P

Doyle, Jacqueline Donaldson. "Librarians as Players in Improvisational Theater: Our Roles in the Changing Clinical Environment." *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1996): 73-79. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1300/J115V15N04_07

Evans, G. Edward, and Holland Christie. *Managerial Leadership for Librarians: Thriving in the Public and Nonprofit World*. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2017.

Frost, Anthony, and Yarrow, Ralph. *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre and Performance : History, Practice, Theory*. New York: Palgrave. 2016.

Halpern, Charna, Close, Del, and Johnson, Kim. *Truth in Comedy : The Manual of Improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Pub., 2001.

Hensley, Randy Burke, Lori Arp and Beth S. Woodard. "Curiosity and Creativity as Attributes of Information Literacy." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (2004): 31-36.

Hosier, Allison. "I was once a world famous magician: Using improv to improve performance in the classroom" *College & Research Libraries News* [Online] 80, no. 8 (2019): 456. doi:https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.80.8.456

Howard, Christy, Melissa Adams-Budde, Joy Myers, and Grant Jolliff. "Shaping Our Literate Lives: Examining the Role of Literacy Experiences in Shaping Positive Literacy Identities of Doctoral Students." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 11, no. 2 (2017): 7. DOI: 10.20429/ijsotl.2017.110208

Jennerich, Elaine Zaremba, and Edward J. Jennerich. *The reference interview as a creative art*. Englewood: Libraries Unlimited, 1997.

Johnstone, Keith. *Impro : Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York: Theatre Arts Book, 1979.

Kuh, George D., and Carol Geary Schneider. *High-impact educational practices: what they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008.

Kulhan, Bob, and Chuck Crisafulli. *Getting to "yes and": the art of business improv*. Stanford: Stanford Business Books, an imprint of Stanford University Press, 2017.

Laredo, Jennifer, Melissa Maglio and Heidi Murphy. "Library reality TV : Using Improv Techniques to Transform Your Approach to Customer Service." In *Stellar Customer Service: Training Library Staff to Exceed Expectations*, edited by Mou Chakraborty, 136-142. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2016.

Lenters, Kimberly, and Alec Whitford. "Failing with Grace: Kids, Improv and Embodied Literacies." *Literacy* 52, no. 3 (2018): 117-27. https://doi.org/10.1111/lit.12134

Lobman, Carrie. (2011). "Improvising within the system: Creating new teacher performances in inner-city schools." In *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*, edited by R. Keith Sawyer, 73-93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Mackey, Thomas P., and Trudi E. Jacobson, *Metaliteracy: Reinventing Information Literacy to Empower Learners*. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, an imprint of the American Library Association, 2014.

Markgraf, Jill . "Library Improv." Last modified January 23, 2017. http://libraryimprov.blogspot.com/

Ratten, Vanessa, and Josh Hodge. "So Much Theory, so Little Practice: A Literature Review of Workplace Improvisation Training." *Industrial and Commercial Training* 48, no. 3 (2016): 149-155. DOI: 10.1108/ICT-08-2015-0053

Reale, Michelle. *Becoming a reflective librarian and teacher: strategies for mindful academic practice*. Chicago: ALA Editions, an imprint of the American Library Association, 2017.

Robson, Karen, Leyland Pitt, and Pierre R Berthon. ""Yes, And. . .": What Improv Theater Can Teach Service Firms." *Business Horizons* 58, no. 4 (2015): 357-62. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.02.002

Salinsky, Tom, and Deborah Frances-White. *The improv handbook: the ultimate guide to improvising in comedy, theatre, and beyond*. New York : Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017.

Saunders, Laura and Tien Ung. "Striving for success in the reference interview: A case study." *The Reference Librarian* 58, no. 1 (2017): 46-66. DOI: 10.1080/02763877.2016.1157778

Sawyer, R. Keith. "Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation." *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 2 (2004): 12-20. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033002012

Sawyer, R. Keith. *Structure and improvisation in creative teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Seham, Amy E. *Whose improv is it anyway?: beyond Second City*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Stamatoplos, Anthony. "Improvisational Theater as a Tool for Enhancing Cooperation in Academic Libraries." In *Pushing the edge: explore, engage, extend: proceedings of the Fourteenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, March 12-15, 2009, Seattle, Washington*, edited by D.M. Mueller, 136-142. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2009.

Stamatoplos, Anthony. "Creativity in information literacy teaching: Part two – Applying creativity to teaching." *LOEX Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2014): 8-9, 3. https://commons.emich.edu/loexquarterly/vol41/iss3/5

Stamatoplos, Anthony. "Applying Improvisation in Libraries and Librarianship." In *Creativity for Library Career Advancement: Perspectives, Techniques and Eureka Moments,* edited by Vera Gubnitskaia, Carol Smallwood, and Deb Biggs Tenbusch, 50-57. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2019.

Stamatoplos, Anthony and Edward Trout. "Librarians as Improvisers: An Improvisational Approach to Teaching Information Literacy. " LOEX Conference Proceedings 2010, 33 (2012). https://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1032&context=loexconf2010

Taylor, Robert S. "Question-Negotiation and Information Seeking in Libraries." *College & Research Libraries* 29, no. 3 (1968): 178-94. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.3.251

Wasson, Sam. *Improv nation: how we made a great American art*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.