

BRAIN GYMPROVISE: IMPROV-ING THE START OF YOUR LESSONS

by Brett Anderson and Megan Furniss, Improguise



The following resource is derived from workshops by Brett Anderson and Megan Furniss from ImproGuise presented at the GTI Axis Summit 2019. This resource contains tools and tips for practical techniques to embrace innovative teaching strategies by engaging learners through reflection, movement, and storytelling inspired by Improv Theatre.

The Global Teachers Institute hosted its annual GTI Axis Summit in Johannesburg. The conference creates a great platform for teachers to share ideas and learn from each other. The aim of the conference is to provide teachers with training, curriculum development and performance programmes that have a lasting impact on student learning.

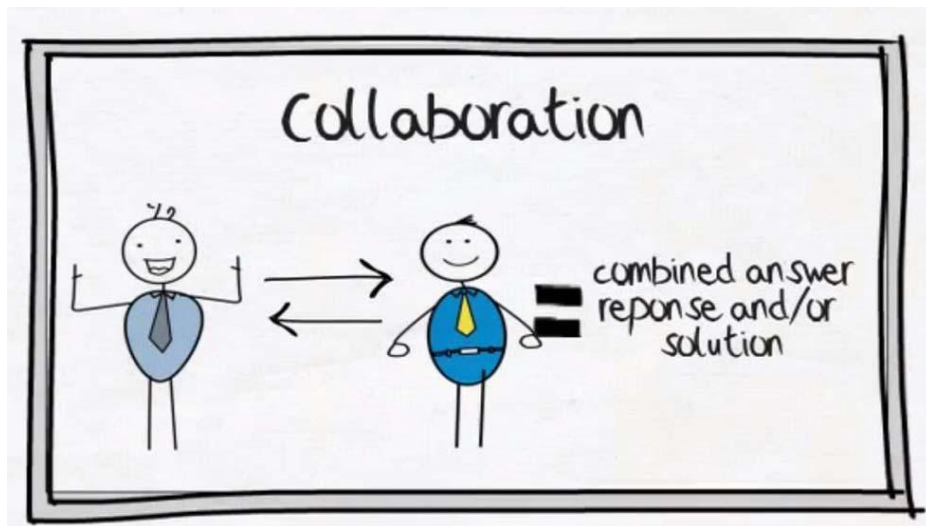
The workshop provided teachers with tools to grab the attention of their class as they begin a lesson using both physical, breathing and verbal exercises, many of them inspired by Brett and Megan's work in Improv Theatre. The whole workshop was a combination of participation and instructional content and so delegates learnt as they experienced. This workshop showed participants how to wake their "on the spot spontaneity" in a fun way. The aim of the workshop was to have teachers feeling empowered and excited about the resources they will take back to their classrooms.

Think about the sort of teacher you are. Are you a dancer, a singer, a performer of any kind? You can integrate all these talents into your teaching. As educators, we need to examine our conceptions of teaching and open ourselves up to change and become disrupters in our classrooms. By including learners in 'making the magic happen' we challenge traditional teaching methods and make the learning experience creative and fun for learners.

Here are some techniques for improv in the classroom:

1. What if?

Consider the questions you ask and allow in your classroom. The curriculum can be restrictive and limit curiosity. Teachers must encourage their learners to ask questions and practice metacognition through presenting 'what if' questions. With a normal question, your brain quickly uses previous information and experiences to devise an acceptable answer. With a "what if?" question, your brain usually holds no previous precedent to easily rely upon for an acceptable answer, so the answer heads to a different area of the brain and challenges your thinking.



2. Learning through doing

A substantial amount of learning takes place between birth and the age of three. Children in this age group are constantly playing and doing. Research indicates that activities that include learners in active problem-solving help learners understand and remember concepts better. Teachers need to make learners creators of content instead of just consumers.

Improv theatre offers several exercises to help learners 'do' more:

2.1 *Breaking the Ice*

Gather learners in a circle and have each learner introduce themselves by saying their name aloud and accompanying their name with a physical gesture. Everyone in the group then mirrors this gesture. This game focuses on eye contact, acceptance, listening and building trust and support.

2.2 *Collaborative Storytelling*

Gather learners in a circle and have them tell a story collaboratively. Each learner may only contribute one word. This exercise centres on listening and sharing and develops learners' non-verbal reading skills.

2.3 *Pass the Snap*

By playing a game of 'Pass the Snap' - one person snaps their fingers and whoever they make eye-contact with "catches" the snap and passes it along. You can modify

this game and use it to revise for tests, review subject material and other memory-based lessons. The game improves eye contact, non-verbal communication and encourages inclusion as learners work together to learn.

2.4 Character Play

This exercise can be based on a novel that learners are studying. A panel of experts is created (based on characters in the novel) and a random topic is formed. For example, the panel becomes experts in “ostrich farming”. Learners will need to dig deeper into their characters personalities, physical traits and story. The goal is to understand the character, so you know how they’d react to certain situations. The game helps learners empathise with the character on a deeper level. This can help gauge how well learners have understood the novel.

3. Why you should try this out

According to McKnight and Scruggs¹, activities such as improvisation can contribute to building a learning environment where students are motivated and interested in what they are learning. They also introduce an age-old topic in the education space; the concept of the democratic classroom. The concept values student participation, encouraging student-directed classrooms where teachers and students work in a partnership. In these classrooms, self-expression is advanced through skill-building.

School curriculums are always changing in our country but what I have noticed is the lack of student participation and the lack of interest in learning because it is not fun. Improvisation is a great way to make learning fun in your classroom and creating a lasting impression on your students’ lives.

Improvisation games come in different categories, depending on what tools the teacher needs to tackle a certain dynamic in the classroom. Improv games can be used to help students tackle, encourage or learn:

- Acceptance
- Association
- Audience Participation
- Audience warm-up
- Characters
- Concentration

¹ McKnight, K.S, Scruggs, M. 2008. The Second City Guide to Improv in the Classroom: using improvisation to teach skills and boost learning, e-book, accessed 7 August 2019, <http://bit.ly/2ZUZ3gj>.

- Continuation
- Die
- Endowment
- Energy
- Environment
- Exercise
- Experts
- Icebreakers
- Limitations
- Long Form
- Look and Listen
- Narration
- Performance
- Singsong
- Solo
- Spontaneity
- Trust
- Verbal wit
- Warm-up

The following is a list of some of the games that were played during the workshop:

It's my fault: Learners pass a water bottle to each other. When the learner who the bottle is thrown to does not/not able to catch it, both learners lay on the floor and shout out "It's my fault". This game teaches learners the importance of letting go and knowing it is ok to make mistakes and move on.

Zoom Skreech: The learners form a circle, and they each take a turn to say "zoom" in a clockwise direction, from one learner to another, as this continues, any learner can change the direction to anticlockwise by saying "skreech". During the game, if a learner says "floom" pointing at another learner in the circle, this changes the direction and passes the "zoom" to that person to continue clockwise. This is a game about power, and it is a really good way to identify and explore the binaries of power. It also requires the learner to pay attention even when it is not their turn, requiring their attention at all times.

"WHA Skeedah": This is an advanced version of Zoom Screech. The learners pass a "whoa" around in a circle and clap their hands as they say it. If the learner wants to change the direction of the "whoa", they say "skeedah" and clap as they say it. To

pass the “whoa” to anyone in the circle, the learner says “floom” while clapping, thus sending the “whoa” in a completely different direction.

Use this prop: You choose one prop, put it in the middle of a circle and anyone can jump in and demonstrate what else it could be. During the workshop, the prop was a broom, and some demonstrated that it could be a window cleaner, a person, hair, a guitar and an oar. This is great for classroom settings that do not have many resources. You can use anything and use your imagination to create more resources from one object.

Wish to explore the topic further?

If you want to improve the learning environment in your classroom, visit <http://improvencyclopedia.org/>, for access to more games and information on how to use improvisation to improve your learning environment.

To access a BRIDGE Open Education Resource on ‘Integrating Movement in the Classroom’, visit <https://bit.ly/32xza7Y>.

A message from Brett and Megan: The "Yes, Lets" of Improv



When it comes to Improv, rule #1 is Yes. The answer is always Yes. When someone makes a suggestion or starts a story and you respond with "no" the story dies or ends and a new idea has to be thought of, thus wasting time and energy and breaking down trust.

More than that though we encourage the "Yes, and..." which is a bit like a raise in poker. This makes someone see that you have given thought and support their idea and that you need to add some more to it. The "Yes, and..." takes an idea that is already acknowledged as being great and adds a little more to it, so some new information or a new direction in addition to what has been received.

We call "no" a dead-end because it blocks further action or development and then we call "maybe" a wimp because it is not a "no", but it also is not an enthusiastic "yes". If your response is a "maybe", this suggests that you don't really like the idea but because you can't say "no" you will give a "maybe" instead, therefore it is also highly discouraged.

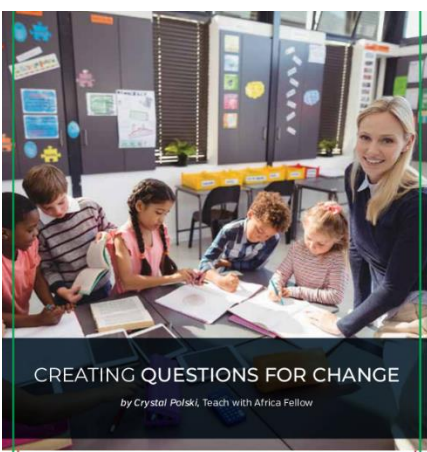
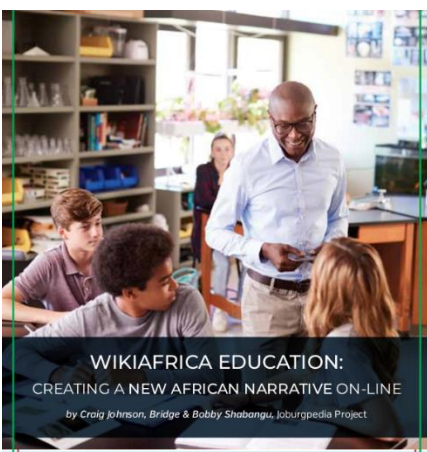
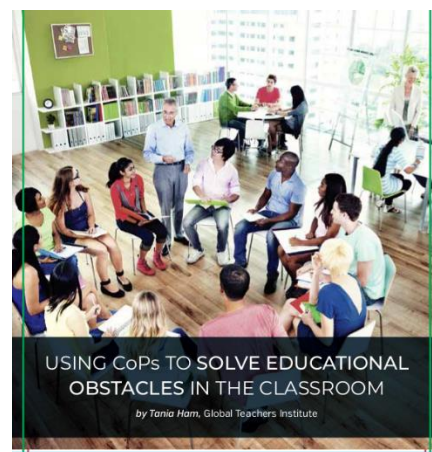
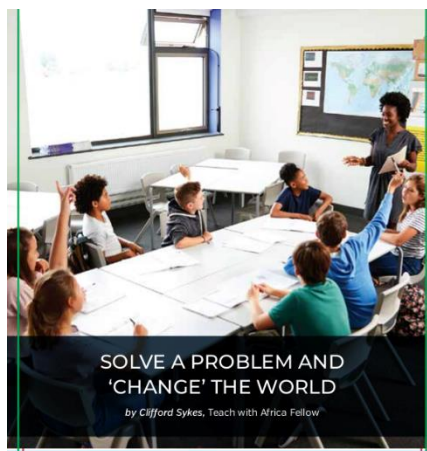
The benefits of using Improv in your classroom are that they unlock or free the imagination and creativity that is contained within each of your learners as well as

inviting teamwork and the support and celebration of each other's ideas. Once you start creating the positive space to play the improv games and activities we have shared (and others you may find online) you will be encouraging this attitude and practice of collaboration which has the potential to see incredible things created in your classroom.

Improv can be used as an icebreaker or attention-grabber but also it can be used to deal with the subjects you teach in more creative ways or to provide a fresh perspective on some knowledge the learners already have.

Find out what works with your group and be okay when things don't work. You might even find if you start doing it enough that you are creating your own games and activities or adapting the ones we have given you to better fit your group.

Happy creating, love Brett and Megan [ImproGuise]



Download the full series at: <http://knowledge.globalteachers.org>

ABOUT GTI

The Global Teachers Institute (GTI) is a teacher development network of educators, schools and organisations committed to developing high quality teachers through school based initial teacher education programmes, international exchanges and collaborative platforms.

Our mission is to develop reflective, empathetic, socially responsible master teachers for high-need African schools through projects and interventions for replication and scale.

THANK YOU

With your contributions in the 2019 GTI Axis Summit, you've demonstrated your commitment to our work of teacher development. Your support has repeatedly played a key role in getting us a step closer to our vision of training quality teachers facilitating learning that creates a just, equitable and inclusive world.

PRESENTERS



**Brett Anderson and
Megan Furniss**

Brett Anderson is a primary school teacher and Megan Furniss a playwright, director and performer. Together they have been doing Improv for over 20 years in schools and businesses, helping organisations work on team-building by providing entertaining shows and classes based on Improv Theatre.

PRODUCER



Chosi Mtoba

'I have a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Media and International Relations and I recently completed my Honours Degree in International Relations.'

I believe that it is only through quality education that people can gain true freedom. Education research has an important contribution to the future of education in South Africa. Being a part of that change is essential to being a part of realising the dreams of many in Africa.'

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