

## Sample Pages from Impowerment Improv

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# Empowerment Improv

Using improv to create  
self-awareness & confidence in your students



TheatreFolk®

Jennine Profeta

Impowerment Improv  
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Published by Theatrefolk Inc.

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# ↑ INTRODUCTION

Welcome to Impowerment Improv, using improv to create self-awareness and confidence in your students.

Why impowerment? Improv is powerful, and for me, personal. Improv gave me a voice. It gave me confidence, and I've seen how it empowers others.

You too, can use improv for more than just warm-up games and end of class fun time. Improv is experiential learning. Improv is social and emotional learning. You can use it for good, because this is not your typical improv resource.

I'm going to teach you how to validate improv to your administrators by helping your students take risks, embrace failure, find their confidence, and become more aware. There's also an Unit Outline using all the exercises in the Appendix.

I have been performing and teaching improv for more than 20 years. I started teaching improv at the Second City Training Centre in Toronto. From there, I moved into corporate workshops, teaching adults how to use improv in business to help with leadership and confidence. This showed me how these exercises and techniques could help young people.

When I was a student, I struggled with confidence. Many of my teachers and directors gave me the note, "Be more confident on stage," but they couldn't tell me how. Once I started teaching, I found the answer in improv, and I'm going to teach that answer to you.

The exercises in this resource are designed to create a safe environment in which students can go beyond their old patterns to take risks, embrace failure, be more confident, and be aware of the effects of their word choice. If you already use improv in the classroom, some of the exercises will seem familiar. That's on purpose; they're good introductory exercises that lend themselves well to these concepts.

Improv gives you the opportunity to draw attention to these important concepts and talk about them. You can go beyond playing games and take improv to the next level. For example, throughout this resource I will share how to debrief and offer debriefing tips.

## Debrief

After playing *Yes, and*, and *No, because*, ask students how the two conversations compare. *Yes, and* is usually a more positive conversation and *No, because* gets them nowhere.

The debrief is key to this kind of work. We want students to talk about what they experience; it gives them a chance to identify what's working and what's not. Debriefing is used to help students identify the concepts and techniques behind the fun. These conversations can lead to deeper discussions about issues such as bullying, self-worth, and judgment by peers.

## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. In your opinion, what is the purpose of improv?
2. How do you currently use improv in your curriculum?
3. Does your administration support your use of improv in your curriculum? Why or why not?
4. What improv exercises work best with your students? In your opinion, why do these exercises work?
5. What improv exercises don't work well with your students? In your opinion, why do these exercises not work?
6. Do your students take risks in your class? Why or why not?
7. In your opinion, what improv exercises can be used to build students' self-awareness?
8. In your opinion, what improv exercises can be used to build students' confidence?
9. Do you debrief with your students after improv exercises? Why or why not?
10. What life skills can be improved through improv?

# ↑ RISK-TAKING AND CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

In this section we're going to help students take risks and talk about how to allay fear. How can students get comfortable with the uncomfortable? We're also going to introduce the concept of *I've got your back*. Improv is about taking risks and trusting that our ideas will be supported and built upon by others.

## THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

To create an environment where students can trust and feel supported, start the first lesson by creating a set of rules that will govern their risk-taking. Repeat the rules at the beginning of every session.

Ask students: *What rules do you want to include?* Remind them of the framework: we are creating a safe environment for risk-taking and feeling supported. This is how we're going to get students to be comfortable with the uncomfortable. They usually offer up: be kind to one another, support each other's ideas, don't swear or use mean words, don't hit one another. This is a good way to incorporate any school or district policies when it comes to language and physical contact.

## GROUP WARM-UPS

Once you have the rules in place, move into some group warm-ups. Start with something fun to get them out of their heads, especially if they're scared. Have students take risks without even knowing it.

## WARM-UP: GREETINGS

### Objective

To get students to instinctually act rather than think

### Round 1

- Students will move about the room.
- On your signal, they will start greeting each other as themselves as they move.
- All they have to do is say "hello" or "hi." Nothing more.
- Let this play out for 30 seconds.

### Round 2

- Students will move about the room.
- This time, give them direction:
  - *Say hello as if you're super excited to see each other.*
  - *Say hello as if you're all cowboys.*
  - *Say hello as if you're all superheroes.*
  - *Say hello as if you're all politicians on the campaign trail.*
- **Side-coaching Note:** If you notice that students are reluctant to take a risk and try on a persona, encourage them to borrow from others.
  - For example, if they're asked to be a superhero and they don't know what to do, encourage them to look at what others are doing. They can borrow a pose or a physical stance if that helps them get into the character. See if they can tap into this borrowed energy and let it spark their imagination.
- **Time Management:** The objective is for students to get out of their heads. If students are having fun, let this exercise go on for as long as you can. Try not to manage the time with these exercises.

### Debrief

Ask students: *What personas were easier or harder to do? What was it like to be the politician? Does playing a confident character come naturally to you, or is it challenging? Did it feel like you were taking a risk playing this game?* Point out that they were taking risks all along. Saying hello is a risk. Playing a character out of their comfort zone is a risk.



## WARM-UP: CLAP FOCUS

### Objective

To make eye contact, to make a strong direct choice

### Round 1

- Form a circle.
- You should start this game. Look across the circle at a student (Person B), make eye contact, and send a clap to them.
  - It's all about focus and making a strong direct choice (the clap).
  - The clap: Lengthen your right arm straight out in front of you with your hand flat and your palm to the side with the thumb on top. Bring your left hand to meet your right and clap your hands, pointing towards the person you want the clap to go to.
- Person B's job is to make eye contact; they don't have to clap back.
  - Instead, Person B will turn to someone else and send the clap their way.
- Person B will turn to Person C across the circle, make eye contact, and send the clap to them.
- The game will continue around the circle with students making eye contact and sending the clap to the next person (whomever they wish).

Don't worry if the first round is slow — this is a great place to stop and debrief.

#### Debrief

Ask students: *Does it matter who you clap at?* It does not; you just have to clap at someone. Then draw attention to their body language. Are they standing with their arms or legs crossed? Do they have their hands in their pockets? If they do, it will be harder for them to hear or receive the clap. You are not trying to correct them in this situation. Just create awareness about their body language.

### When we open up, we feel vulnerable. This is scary.

- Have everyone take a deep breath together, stretch up their arms, and bring their arms down to their sides. Do this three times. On the last one, yawn audibly on the way down.
- Ask them to take note of where their arms are now, and if they feel their arms starting to cross again or their hands going into their pockets during the game, to think about returning to this open posture.
- Then go back to playing the game. They usually notice the difference the second time around, and the game goes faster and more smoothly.

## Round 2

- Return to the game.
- You should start this round as well. Look across the circle at a student (Person B), make eye contact, and send a clap to them.
- Person B's job is to make eye contact with you and accept the clap.
- Person B will turn to Person C across the circle, make eye contact, and send the clap to them. Person C will make eye contact with Person B and accept the clap.

### Debrief

Ask students: *How did the first round compare to the second round? What was it like to look people in the eyes?* For some people, this will be the biggest risk of all. Ask students: *What is it like when we don't look people in the eye?* That is usually when the game falls apart. For those who are anxious, this is a great opportunity to talk about dealing with things that are overwhelming.

In this game, students only have two objectives: to establish eye contact with someone and make a strong direct choice by sending the clap to them. Breaking it down this way makes the game seem less overwhelming and scary.

From here, we'll move into one of our bigger exercises: *Yes, And*, which is a foundation of improv exercise. Everyone should know how to play it, and we'll be using it again in our positive/negative speak section.

## FOUNDATION EXERCISE: YES, AND

### Objective

To say yes to people's ideas, even when we're inclined to say no

### Round 1

- Start with a round of *No, because*.
- Have students break into pairs and find a place to sit where they can hear each other.
- In their pairs, Partner A will suggest where they'd like to have class next week.
  - *Next week, let's have class on the moon.*
- Partner B will reply with a sentence starting with "No, because."
  - *No, because I don't like lunar surfaces.*
- Partner A must continue pitching their idea, and Partner B will keep saying "No, because..."

### Round 2

- After a few minutes, switch. Now Partner B will pitch their idea for where to have class next week.
  - *Next week, let's have class in a ditch.*
- This time, Partner A will respond with "Yes, and."
  - *Yes, and we can collect parasites for science class while we're there.*
- The conversation will continue, but Partner B will be invited to use "yes, and" in their responses.

### Debrief

Ask students: *How did the No, because conversations compare to the Yes, and ones?*

Often, they'll say *No, because* made them feel discouraged or frustrated because the conversation constantly has to start over. If they say that they liked saying "no," or it was good, reframe the question to ask if they thought they were succeeding in convincing their friend.

For the *Yes, and* conversation, they'll often say it was easier to build upon. For those who claim they like saying "no, because," I point out that it's always easier to say no, but it's a bigger risk to say yes. Point out the effect that saying "no" has versus saying "yes." "No" leaves people feeling crappy. It's harder to build upon an idea.

“Yes” leads us somewhere. Even if we don’t love the idea, saying yes gives us direction. This is not about being a robot or a doormat; it’s about finding a way to work with someone’s idea to create something bigger and better. If you have time, you can throw in an exercise to support *Yes, and*, such as *Yes, let’s* or *Gift Giving*. You’ll find these exercises in the Appendix.

## EXERCISE: THANK YOU STATUES

### Objective

To take a risk even when you don't want to

### Round 1

- Form a circle.
- Start the round by standing in the circle and striking a pose.
  - I usually do something like stand with my arms raised like a ballerina.
- Ask students: *If I were a statue, what might I be a statue of? What might I be doing?*
- Invite students to shout out whatever ideas they have. At the end, point out that ALL of their answers were correct. I could be a ballerina or the Statue of Liberty or holding a really big baby. Everyone sees different things, and there is no one right answer.
- Invite someone to join you in the circle and strike a complementary pose.
  - There does not need to be physical contact, but it should look like the two poses go together to form one statue.
  - If students look terrified at the idea of going into the circle, tell them it doesn't matter what pose they strike so long as they do something.
- Once someone joins you in the circle and strikes a complementary pose, say "Thank you" and leave the circle, leaving the student to hold the pose.
  - The "thank you" is *important*. You are *thanking the student for accepting your idea and finding a way to work with it*.
- Invite another student from the outside of the circle to go into the centre and strike a new complementary pose.
- When they do, the first student will say "Thank you" and leave the circle.
- Repeat this for a few rounds and then debrief.

### Debrief

Ask students: *How was it to stand in the middle of the circle?* If someone says they were having a hard time keeping their balance with a tricky pose, ask: *Did the complementary poses matter?* The answer is no. Students will say they just wanted someone to join them in the middle so they could leave.

Ask students on the outside of the circle, especially those who didn't go in: *Why didn't you go in the circle?* If no one responds, bring up examples: *I didn't have any ideas. My ideas weren't good enough. I didn't know what to do.* I point out that these are moments when we're scared to take a risk.

This is not about shaming anyone. You want to show them how many people feel this way all the time, and that they're not alone. Then tell them how they can overcome this fear.

## Round 2

- Continue playing the game as before. This time, invite students into the centre one at a time. No one can sit out.
  - I instruct them that if they're feeling nervous while standing on the outside of the circle, waiting for their turn, to remember their task.
  - Their task is to walk into the circle, look at what their friend is doing, and trust that they'll know exactly what to do.
  - If you see students crossing their arms or putting their hands in their pockets, remind them to go back to those open postures we talked about in Clap Focus.
- During Round 2 each student will go into the circle one at a time, and this time they'll rock it.
- Debrief again.

### Debrief

Ask students: *How did the two rounds compare?* They usually say that the second round was easier and more fun. Remind them that all they have to do is break down the task: walk into the circle, look at your friend, and strike a pose. Point out that they took a risk and they were fine.

## EXERCISE: I'M A

### Objective

To reinforce what students have learned so far

- Form a circle.
- Start the round by going into the circle.
  - I usually hold up my arms and say, "I'm a tree."
- Ask students what might go with a tree, pointing out that this is a word-association exercise.
- Someone might call out "a leaf." Invite them to come into the circle and stand like they are a leaf.
  - If they give me a look of terror, I just say, "Come in and strike a pose. It doesn't matter what you do so long as you say 'I am a leaf.'"
- Ask those in the circle what else might go with a tree and a leaf.
- Someone might call out a bird. Invite them into the centre to strike a pose.
- Continue until students stop calling out ideas. Now, the first person, in this case you, will choose someone to leave behind. For example, the bird.
- Everyone will go back to the outside of the circle.
  - If the person left behind looks at you with terror, remind them that they've already done the task that was required of them. They're standing like a bird. They just have to repeat it to remind everyone in the circle what they are.
- From here, build a new tableau inspired by the bird.
- Someone might call out a birdhouse or the sky, and you will invite students into the circle to strike a pose and state what they are with "I'm a..."
  - I find students tend to enjoy this exercise. Continue playing for as long as you like or time allows
  - End with an all play where everyone in the class is involved in one tableau. Make sure everyone goes in at least once.

#### Debrief

This is an end-of-class game so there isn't a big debrief, but point out that everyone took a risk and they lived through it.

I come back to these exercises often because they do a great job of illustrating several points. Don't be afraid to repeat exercises in subsequent classes. Every time they play them, they'll get more comfortable with that exercise and take bigger risks. They'll move from objects to concepts such as, "I'm the joy that comes from communing with nature!"

We have the opportunity to show students what it means to take a risk, and that it's okay, even if it's scary. This is not the same as jumping out of an airplane. We try something and it's fine. We didn't spontaneously combust. Risk is an important part of life. We can use improv to teach students how to get out from behind their own fears and take a risk, and that's an amazing life lesson.

## CONCEPT: I'VE GOT YOUR BACK

I've used this concept many times as an improviser before going on stage with my fellow performers. We go around to everybody in the room, touch them on the back, and say out loud, "I've got your back."

I said earlier that no physical contact is necessary, but in this case, I find that the physical contact unifies and connects the group (they can tap each other on the shoulder as well). It also reminds us that we're in this together. It's a good concept to introduce to students because it helps them relax. They are not alone. Improv is a group mindset.

Feel free to incorporate this ritual into your classroom. Try it after you set up the rules of engagement. You can also use it before you start each session. Have everyone move around the room, pat each other on the back or shoulder, and say, "I've got your back."

## STUDENT ENTRY PROMPTS

If you use journals or bell work at the beginning of class, get students thinking about risk and how they feel about taking risks. Some entry prompt questions could be:

1. Would you describe yourself as a risk taker? Why or why not?
2. How do you feel when you're asked to take a risk?
3. Describe a time when you took a risk or a time you backed away from a risk.
4. Is taking risks healthy? Why or why not?

## STUDENT EXIT SLIP QUESTIONS

At the end of class, have students take five minutes to reflect on their experience using an exit slip. Give students a slip of paper with a couple of questions that directly relate to the class work. This allows you to review how students are responding to the activities. Some suggested questions are:

1. Which of today's exercises came easy for you? Which exercises were challenging? Explain your answer.
2. Which game felt like the biggest risk today? Explain your answer.
3. Based on your participation today, what do you think about being/not being a risk taker?
4. What did you do today that surprised you? Did you see someone else do something that surprised you?
5. Reflect on the concept of "I've got your back." What does it mean to you?



# Teaching Resources

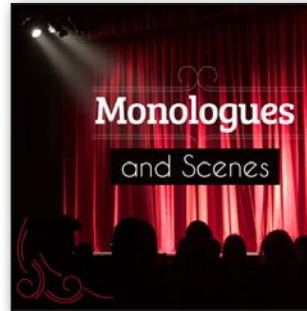
Quality resources to use in your drama classroom



## The Drama Classroom Companion

*The Drama Classroom Companion* is filled with articles and exercises to build the skills needed for theatrical performance as well as real world skills like creative thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

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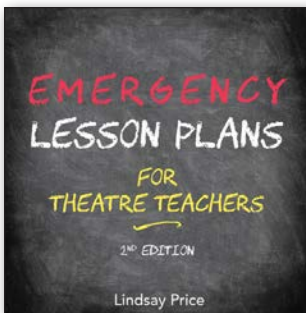


## Monologue and Scene Collections

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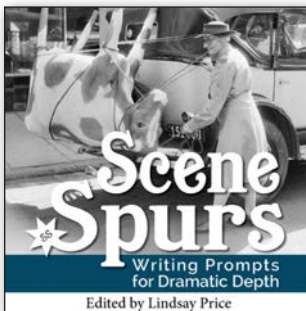
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## The Student Director's Handbook

Help students take their show from first audition to opening night with *The Student Director's Handbook*. This easy-to-use ebook is full of guidelines, tips and templates designed to help students create a vision, circumvent problems and organize rehearsals on their way to a successful production.

[theatrefolk.com/student-director](http://theatrefolk.com/student-director)



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*Scene Spurs* is a collection of photo-based writing prompts developed by playwright Lindsay Price. The set includes 35 different Spurs along with an instruction guide to integrate them into your drama classroom.

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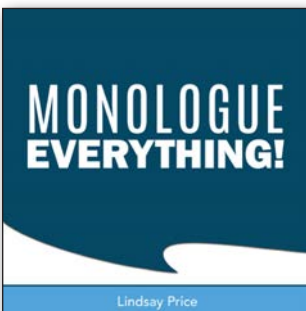


## Write Your Own Vignette Play

Your students want to write and perform an original play. You want to include a playwriting unit in your program. But where to start? What if your students have never written a play before? What if you've never written before?

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