

2-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

McWaters, Viv (2006) "Improvised facilitation – the paradox of being prepared to be spontaneous," *ADR Bulletin*: Vol. 8: No. 6, Article 2.

Available at: <http://epublications.bond.edu.au/adr/vol8/iss6/2>

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Facilitation and the benefits of becoming spontaneous

Improvised facilitation – the paradox of being prepared to be spontaneous

Viv McWaters

*You never plough a field by turning it over in your mind.
Irish Proverb*

Introduction

The group was returning from their morning tea break. I needed a process to help them get inside the content, to engage with it, to explore the relevance to their own work. As they sat down I still had no idea what I was going to do. They looked at me expectantly. My mind was racing at warp speed, which wasn't helping much! Then I remembered three of the key tenets of improv: Do something! Start anywhere! Be average! So I did – and it worked!

It's not always appropriate to improvise. For example, I don't want

the pilot of my international flight to decide to improvise a landing – but, if something does go wrong I hope he or she can improvise. The same is true of facilitation. On many occasions there is no need to improvise. Our processes are sound, our experience adequate and the workshop straightforward. However, sometimes we are surprised. Other agendas emerge, there are different expectations, despite all our efforts the real situation remained hidden until that horrible moment when we're in front of the group and realise all our planning is next to useless. That's when facilitators need to improvise – to be spontaneous and respond to the moment.

We can learn a lot about being spontaneous from improvisers. Believe



it or not, most improvisers even the ones who are well-known, such as the people on that famous Drew Carey show ‘Whose Line Is It Anyway?’; Theatre Sports competitors and many stand-up comedians, are not naturally spontaneous – they practice, practice, practice.

They also apply some basic improv principles that enable them to respond spontaneously. It is these principles that can be applied to facilitation – indeed, can be applied anywhere, anytime spontaneity is needed.

What is improv?

Improv is a specialised form of acting where no script is used. According to Issy Gesell,¹ the modern form of improv was developed to help actors solve problems on stage. Issy first studied improv theatre because he believed improv theatre players had a magical talent that most others did not.

He longed to decipher the mystical code that could allow ordinary people to become fearlessly spontaneous and creatively humorous. Issy, and many others, including myself, have discovered that the improviser’s skills are not so mystical after all.

In his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell² describes improv as involving people making very sophisticated decisions on the spur of the moment, without the benefit of any kind of script or plot. What is terrifying about improv, Gladwell suggests, is the fact that it appears utterly random and chaotic. But the truth is that improv isn’t random and chaotic at all. Improv is an art form governed by a series of rules. Performers practice together so much because they want to make sure that when they’re up on stage, everyone abides by those rules.

Some myths about improv

Improvising requires ‘special’ talent: Most improvisers are ordinary people like you and me. Most have ‘day’ jobs and join improv groups for all sorts of reasons – to have fun, be a part of a social group, explore a different way of expressing creativity, to build self-confidence.

I’m not funny enough to improvise: Many improvs on the stage are funny because of the juxtaposition of ideas. Humour emerges from the improv and is not a prerequisite for spontaneity.

I’m not spontaneous enough to improvise: Getting up on stage to improvise in front of an audience is much easier than facilitating. Improv players practice and perform together, providing a safety net for each other. Facilitators often work (perform) alone. Spontaneity can be learned – true! It’s a skill like any other, built around

Be present

To receive an offer we need to be present – not just physically, but with all our senses. Attentive, alert, listening, feeling – being present for the group – not thinking about what we should have done, or will be doing next, but being present right here and now. Improv players have to be constantly alert to the offers of their companions. They practice listening to several people simultaneously while also taking in their surroundings and being aware of where everyone, and every thing on stage.

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some basic principles. If you know and practice the principles of improv, you too can be spontaneous.

Improv principles for facilitators

Say ‘yes!’

Accept all offers. For just one day, accept all offers instead of prejudging, analysing or blocking. Say, ‘yes!’ An improv group can spontaneously develop a complex story on stage because they accept all offers – they don’t block each other, or stop to determine what might be the best way to proceed. They build on the offer, sometimes (even often) making mistakes, and accepting new offers. The story and the meaning emerges from the action.

Facilitation application

Consider everything that happens when you are facilitating as an offer. The data projector hasn’t arrived. See it as an offer. Someone challenges the process you are using. See it as an offer. Someone else is cynical, or angry, or withdrawn. See them all as offers. Try it and see how it changes your perspective. See what opportunities open up.

Facilitation application

Be fully and completely present for the group. It shows, and they will notice. Practice listening attentively while observing with your peripheral vision. Be aware of who and what is in the room. Use all of the available space.

Do something

Improvisers often start an action without knowing what it is or where it will take them. Spontaneity is not about thinking quickly. The power of improvisation lies in the physical rather than verbal spontaneity. Solutions lie in actions, not words.³ Improvisers know to do something, anything; and to start anywhere – as long as it is active.

Facilitation application

When in doubt, do something. Start anywhere, but do something. Stop thinking. Stop analysing. Use your body. Move around. Get a different perspective. Ask the group to stand and to move. Meaning emerges from action – and if it doesn’t, be alert to offers.

Be average

Keith Johnstone, the modern ‘father’ of improvisation, suggests that most people block themselves – they self-



ensor. They think their first idea is not good enough, clever enough, original enough.

Facilitation application

Say yes to yourself, as well as others. Don't try and be clever, or funny, or anything – just do something and start anywhere with the first thing that comes to mind – then build on it. No-one will know that you didn't have a plan!

Make mistakes

Improvisation players celebrate failure. They acknowledge what didn't work and move on. This is one way of remaining present. If you are dwelling on something that didn't work in the last scene, you are not fully present for what is happening now.

Facilitation application

Acknowledge and celebrate failure – to yourself and others. Take a bow. And do something else.

Let go

When improv players are relying on each other and accepting offers, there's no way of knowing where something will end up. They have to trust themselves and the group, and let go of preconceived ideas of where something will end up.

Facilitation application

Trust the wisdom of the group. Provide a process as a support for the group's content – and then let them get on with the work they have to do.

Other uses of improv for facilitators

Patricia Madson, author of *Improv Wisdom* suggests that:

... long before planning there was improvising. For millennia humans functioned naturally *only* by thinking on their feet, problem-solving in the here and now ... At some point, however, survival demanded planning ... leapfrogging into the present, we find ourselves nearly strangled by the planning instinct.⁴

By all means research your group, know their objectives, prepare yourself, the space, materials you may need. But don't be too attached to your plan. Try facilitating without a plan, taking into account the improv principles discussed

here. Try it, and see what happens. You may surprise yourself, and delight the group with your spontaneity.

It is important to remember that our role is to facilitate objectives – not to show how clever we are or how many activities we know. It's not about us – it's about the participants. As well as influencing our own practice of facilitating, improv activities can be used to make sense and explore abstract concepts.

Games and activities are a means to an end – not the end in itself. What is important is to know what end you're aiming for – what behavioural change or shift you want – then the selection of activities becomes easy. Every activity, or game, is just an excuse to debrief and learn.

The last word goes to Kat Koppett who uses improv activities in her training programs:

People are starved for the types of interactions that improvisers take for granted. We get to express ourselves creatively, play together, have our ideas honoured and our failures not only forgiven, but celebrated. It is impossible to miss the transformational effects of improv, even for skeptics. The links to the bottom line have become clearer and clearer. Innovation soars. Teams resolve conflicts and work more productively.⁵

And what facilitator wouldn't want that? ❖

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Endnotes

1. Gesell, I (1997) *Playing Along*, Whole Person Associates, Duluth, MN, p ix.
2. Gladwell, M (2005) *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Little, Brown and Co, New York, pp-113.
3. Above note 1 at p x.
4. Madson, P (2005) *Improv Wisdom*, Random House, New York, p 21.
5. Koppett, K (2001). *Training to Imagine*, Stylus Publishing, Sterling, p xvi.