

# **Improvisational Theater**

Student Taught Course, fall 2010

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## **Background:**

For as long as there has been humor there has been improvisational theater. Improv, which goes by half a dozen other names including “theater games” and “comedy sports,” was formally organized in the 1920’s and 1930’s by Viola Spolin, who wanted to teach children acting with a series of games. Since then, Spolin’s technique has been translated into its own form of entertainment.

The basis of improvisational theater is simple: Improv is acting without scripts. A typical Improv game begins with several actors who are given random suggestions by an audience as to their relationship, location, occupation, etc. The actors then use these suggestions to build a scene using a particular game structure.

These days Improv troupes are as common as garage bands. Ranging from the professionals on “Whose Line is It Anyway?” to the amateurs in high schools, Improv troupes are a great way for people to show off their wit. Quick thinking, intelligence, and wit are the triple threat that makes good improvisers.

Though I have only been at Caltech for a year and a half, I know that Caltech is full of great improvisers. Whether it be with clever verbal banter or sharp articles in the newspaper, Caltech students are constantly venting their frustrations with wit. What I propose is a new avenue for the masses of intelligent and funny people at Caltech. An Improv class would tap into that talent and fill a much needed niche. Improv would provide an outlet for the witty and entertainment for the rest. I believe learning science at Caltech is important, but I believe that doing something, anything, that is not science, matters just as much.

## **Structure and Goals:**

Ideally I would like to hold this course once a week for 90 minutes. Each week, the class would begin with simple warm-up games and then delve into practicing the concept of the week. The students would learn two new games and one to two concepts per week that they are to apply outside of class as perpetual homework. Depending on the feelings of the students, I would also like the course to include a culminating performance at the end of the term to be held in SFL amphitheater or some other convenient (and free) venue.

My goal for this course is simple. I want to make Caltech better. One of Caltech's greatest weaknesses is its limited course offerings outside math and science. We could keep adding math and science courses until the end of time, but this would still not broaden the experience of the students. A class like this would be something new and exciting for Techers to try that is beyond the typical scope of Caltech.

One could argue that Caltech already has something like this, after all the Theater Arts at Caltech (TACIT) performs two to three plays a year. This is not the same thing. Much as students take a PE course in soccer instead of joining the team, the notion of joining a full fledged production like TACIT is daunting to most Techers, and, more importantly, requires too much time. I propose a class where it is understood that everyone is a beginner, it is understood

that no one is going to judge you, and most importantly it is understood that if it is not enjoyable, then you are doing it wrong. Caltech, with its copious amounts of science and humanities classes, offers nothing like this.

Similarly, a class in improvisational theater is not without its own merit. In learning the subtleties of improvisation, students learn to have confidence in their ability on stage. This translates to all areas of life, including academia. The improviser who can read an audience well enough to make them laugh will have no trouble holding their attention during a technical presentation. Similarly improvisors who learn to read the people acting with them on stage, can use this same skill in job or graduate school interviews. Though Caltech does offer oral presentation courses, what I propose is quite different. In an oral presentation course you learn how to be specific, how to stand, and how to speak clearly. In an Improv course you learn that you need not be nervous, and suddenly many of your errors are fixed. Improv teaches you much of what you would learn in an oral presentation class implicitly so that these things simply become second nature.

Despite the useful applications of Improv, one might argue that this is the kind of thing people do for fun and is therefore not worthy of status as a class for Caltech credit. But should classes not be fun? There is no reason that every class at Caltech has to be difficult, nor would this class be setting a new precedent. One of Caltech's most popular classes is the cooking class. Like my proposed Improv class, the cooking class teaches a life skill not a method of calculation. Also just like the cooking class, I expect an Improv course to be very popular. After mentioning the idea to other students in my house and various classes, I have a dozen names of students who want to take the class. Caltech has nothing like this. An Improv class would be a fun and creative way to broaden students' experience and teach them a lifelong skill.

### **Topics by week:**

#### *Week 1: Meet and Greet*

Topics: Expectations, Never say “no,” flexibility

New Games: Freeze Tag, Story Story Die

HW: None

In Improv it is important that everyone is comfortable with one another. We will do quick ice breakers, get to know everyone's names, and start in with a simple Improv game called Freeze Tag. We will also pass around a syllabus and float the idea of a culminating performance.

#### *Week 2: Endowment (Guessing) Games*

Topics: Basics of Endowment Games, How to make subtle guesses,

New Games: Return Counter, House Party

HW: Spend some time reading up on your pop culture. Much of what improvisers draw from are things that their audience will find funny. Look up and bring back three pop culture references to be used in the next class.

Examples: Kanye West interrupting Taylor Swift's acceptance speech, Dick Cheney shooting his hunting partner, or the movie 2012 referencing the destruction of Caltech.

#### *Week 3: Rule of Threes*

Topics: Rule of Threes, Comedic timing, Deviation from logic

New Games: Clap One, Lines from a Hat

HW: Practice the Rule of Threes in at least three normal conversations

#### *Week 4: Justification*

Topics: How to justify, How to help a justifier, When to justify  
New Games: One Liners, Slideshow

HW: Look up the history of Improvisation. Other than the founder Viola Spolin, who in history was influential in shaping Improv.

Often in theater games random things are said and done. It is the job of the improvisers to make these actions coherent. Justifiers are those people saddled with the job of justifying the random sayings pulled out of pockets, or the random actions of a partner.

#### *Week 5: Reincorporation*

Topics: Reincorporation: how and when to use, Beginning-middle-end

New Games: Park Bench, Half Life

HW: Find some new games. There are hundreds of Improv games. Look one up and bring it in for us to try.

#### *Week 6: Status*

Topics: Character status, Neutral, Leading with the body

New Games: Translator, Standing Sitting Kneeling

HW: None

Status is a system used in creating a character. From 1 to 10, status describes a character's self confidence and assertiveness. This has nothing to do with the actor himself, but can be used to create more entertaining situations in Improv games. In this session we will play with creating characters of different statuses and practice reading the characters created by others.

#### *Week 7: Repertoire*

Topics: How to give hints

New Games: Questions, Pet Peeve Symphony

HW: Practice the Question game with your friends (at least one and a half hours, don't give up!)

At this point the students should have a good grasp of basic technique and some example games. Some games are more difficult than others thus it is important that students are exposed to a wide variety of games so that they can find their strengths and weaknesses.

#### *Week 8: Highlander*

Topics: How to run a show

New Games: Rhyming Game, Three Scene

HW: Come up with three unusual suggestions for each category

One of the challenges Improv troupes face is stringing together a series of rather unrelated games. Highlander is a way to connect them. It is a friendly "competition" where everyone wins and the audience participates to decide the players' fate.

#### *Week 9: Practice*

Topics: Review

New Games: Clap Two, Interview

HW: Pick your favorite game, and the best performance game

By this time it is my goal that the students will be comfortable with their Improv skills and able to simply improvise freely with one another. This week I reserve for simply practicing Improv and solidifying everything the students have learned thus far.

#### *Week 10: Culminating Performance*

Topics: Structure of Performance

New Games: None unless time permits

HW: Practice at home!

This last session will be some time shortly before the culminating performance. The class will put together a schedule of the games to be played and the key players in limited games.

**Qualifications of instructor:**

I have grown up surrounded by Improv. For me everything from family gatherings to road trips always degenerated into some sort of Improv game. In middle school I had the chance to take classes in improvisational acting, and then made the Improv team my freshman year of high school. After being a member of our troupe “Impulse” for three years, our faculty director took a job at a university. Before then the Improv club had been as much a learning process as it had been a performance venture. From our director we learned the subtleties of improvisation and comedy. The rule of threes, character status, reincorporation, and educated guessing all became integral parts of every game. When she left for Western Washington University, our troupe was left with no faculty director.

As the oldest and most seasoned member to the troupe, I took on the job of director. For my senior year of high school I taught Improv. The most popular club in our high school, Improv was held for one hour a week, with performances two to three times a term. I taught dozens of squirrely high school students for an entire year with great success.