

J JOSSEY-BASS TEACHER

GRADES K-8

The Second City Guide to **Improv** **in the Classroom**

Using Improvisation to Teach Skills
and Boost Learning



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IMPROV IN THE CLASSROOM

It begins with play.

Montessori promotes PLAY:

Enjoyable, purposeful, helping expand new ideas, helps thwart emotional problems, etc.

SPOLIN ON PLAY; Creative theorist who founded what we now call improvisation
Play develops spontaneity and communication within an ensemble of players, communicating with the audience, and problem solving skills.'

Learning the games is a process of problem solving, not a process of students receiving information from a teacher.

PLAY: Develops and demands focus that prompts our physical and mental state to merge.

PLAY: Creates a game having a specific problem to be solved.

PLAY: prompts the merging of action and thought to solve a problem

These games are a process applicable to any field, discipline, or subject matter which creates a place where full participation, communication, and transformation can take place.

WHY IMPROVISATION WORKS IN THE CLASSROOM:

Study of Improvisation requires:

- Content knowledge
- Discipline
- Collaboration
- Social Interaction
- Practice
- Critical Thinking Skills
- Analytical Thinking Skills
- Intuitive Thinking Skills
- Creative Thinking Skills

IMPROVISATION DEVELOPS:

- Listening
- Following Directions
- Focus
- Oral communication
- Team building
- Empathy
- Self Awareness
- Self-Efficacy
- Self-Confidence
- Critical and creative problem Solving
- Idea Generation

AREN'T THESE THE KINDS OF SKILLS THAT WE NEED TO TEACH IN SCHOOLS SO THAT STUDENTS CAN BECOME ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN OUR SOCIETY?

BASICALLY- If children have a voice in the classroom they are more likely to become engaged and involved in their learning and thus more motivated to learn

USEFUL IN ALL CONTENT AREAS

*The foundational concept of most improv that's done is the so called "first rule of improv". What is it?

YES, AND- All ideas are valued and included in an activity. No idea is stupid or dumb. All ideas are accepted and built on. Students feel affirmed and are more encouraged to take creative risks in this environment.

The YES, AND approach is the improvisational concept of agreeing with what a partner in a scene or exercise offers and building on that idea or suggestion.

SPECIAL NEEDS:

Improvisation is a powerful teaching tool for students with special needs; it offers a meaningful context for collaboration and negotiation. It also helps breaking isolated communities into mixed-ability communities in a school. (WHOLE SEGMENTS TO COVER ON THIS AREA)

DIFFERENT TYPES OF LEARNERS

Improvisation is very helpful in addressing the different ways in which kids learn. So many things are folded into improv that you engage many ways of learning.

TABLE 2.1 pg 14

IMPROVISATIONAL ACTIVITIES AND SKILLS FOR LEARNING

**STUDENTS SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER'S EFFORTS BY APPLAUDING, OFFERING POSITIVE FEEDBACK, AND BUILDING ON ONE ANOTHER'S IDEAS.

Table 2.1
Improvisation Activities and Skills for Learning

	SKILLS									
	Listening	Following Directions	Focus	Oral Communication	Team Building	Empathy	Self-Awareness	Self-Confidence	Critical and Creative Problem Solving	Idea Generation
IMPROVISATION EXERCISES				x	x			x	x	x
							x	x	x	
				x	x			x	x	x
	x	x	x		x		x	x		x
						x	x	x		
	x		x	x	x			x	x	
						x	x	x	x	
	x			x	x			x	x	
	x		x			x	x	x	x	
	x	x			x		x	x		
			x			x	x	x		
			x				x	x	x	
	x		x	x	x			x	x	
				x	x		x	x	x	x
	x				x		x	x	x	x
		x	x		x		x	x		
				x	x			x	x	x
			x				x	x		
	x		x	x	x		x	x		
	x		x	x				x	x	x
		x			x		x	x		
	x	x	x					x		

PASS THE CLAP

Overview: This exercise is often used as a warm-up and is excellent for building an ensemble. Students work together to pass a handclap around a circle.

Skills are developed in following directions, focus, team building, self-awareness, and self-confidence.

Instructions

- Invite students to create a circle. Even in a large class, the entire group can participate in the exercise at the same time.
- Instruct students that they will pass a clap around the circle.
- Begin with two students: instruct them to face each other and clap at the same time.
- The student on the left then turns and faces a new partner. Again, they clap at the same time.
- Repeat until the clap has passed around the circle at least once.

Sidecoaching

- "Work together!"
- "Make eye contact!"
- "Each pair of claps should make just one sound."

Tips

- This is another game that is deceptively simple. If students are having trouble clapping simultaneously, try this demonstration: ask several pairs of students to face each other. Instruct them to look at each other's hands and clap. Then, instruct them to look into each other's eyes and clap. Almost always, looking into a partner's eyes is more effective.
- Sometimes students, excited by the game, want to speed up the exercise. Especially as they are learning how to play, this can cause the game to get sloppy. Stop them, point out what's happening, and encourage them to slow down and work together.

- Once they have mastered the basic exercise, some variations can add challenge:
 - Reversing the clap: the player receiving the clap can remain facing the player who passed the clap, clap again, and send the clap back around the circle in the other direction.
 - More claps: the teacher or one of the student players can introduce another clap into the circle, so that more than one clap is circulating at once.
 - Throwing it across the circle: a receiver may elect to pass the clap to any of the players in the circle.

ZIP ZAP ZOP

Overview: In this fast-paced game of concentration, students pass energy and focus to each other.

Skills are developed in listening, following directions, focus, and self-confidence.

Instructions

- Invite anywhere from six students up to the entire class to stand in a circle in the playing area.
- The first time the game is played, ask all of the students to practice an “energy clap,” in which they sweep one hand across the other and end up pointing their whole hand toward another player. Done correctly, this brush-clap will make a clapping sound.
- Once they’ve mastered the energy clap, tell them to accompany each clap by saying “Zip” or “Zap” or “Zop.”
- Tell students that “zip zap zop” is a mutating ball of energy that will change every time it moves to another player, from zip to zap to zop and then back to zip again.
- To begin the game, one student claps at someone and says “Zip.” The receiver claps at someone else and says “Zop,” and so forth.

A new round begins when someone doesn’t receive or send, or gets “zip zap zop” out of sequence.

Sidecoaching

“Make eye contact. Agree that you are sending and receiving.”

“Focus is more important than speed.”

“Keep the energy in motion.”

Tips

- Eye contact is very important in this exercise. Remind students to make eye contact with each other before passing the energy.

- Students enjoy playing elimination rounds; when someone drops the energy, he sits out.
- In large classes, three, four, or more circles can be set up at the same time to play the game.

Reference

Spolin, V. (1986). *Improvisation for the theater* (3rd ed.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

LITERACY LEARNING AND IMPROVISATION

IMPROVISATION CAN HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON FURTHERING OUR LITERACY GOALS FOR STUDENTS!

Prediction, sequencing, vocabulary building, inferencing, and reflection are skills that are used in improvisation exercises as well as lessons that encourage and develop students' literacy skills.

- Helps students develop literacy skill sets

- Students can create meaning

- Shown that students are able to understand text when they act it out because they figure it out.

TABLE 3.1 pg 29

COMPARING READING INSTRUCTION IN A BALANCED LITERACY PROGRAM TO IMPROVISATION EXERCISES IN THE CLASSROOM

CLASSROOM: Use improv and drama to create sketches based on what is being read in class.

Improvisation and Writing Links

There are strong links between writing and improvisation exercises. As with reading, a current model for teaching writing is built on a framework that encourages collaboration and creating text that is authentic and personally meaningful.

##Using improvisation, students can experience the thrill of exploring an idea, creating a character, experiencing an environment, using an object, or telling a story—usually on a far more complex and sophisticated level than they can on paper.

This experience benefits students at every level of proficiency because it separates thinking and creating from the physical act of writing (where they sometimes get bogged down).

- **GENERATING TOPICS AND IDEAS** FOR WRITING (PREWRITING): String of Pearls; Beginning, Middle, and End; One-Word Story

- GAMES THAT HELP STUDENT WRITERS DEVELOP A SENSE OF NECESSARY **DETAILS** FOR WRITTEN TEXT INCLUDE: Parts of a Whole, String of Pearls, Object Work, One-Word Story and conducted story.

- GAMES THAT SUPPORT **DEVELOPMENT OF VOCABULARY**: Parts of a Whole, One-Word Story, Object Work

- STORY ELEMENTS: **PLOT, CHARACTER AND CONFLICT**- One-Word Story; Beginning, Middle, End; Conducted Story; Slide Show; String of Pearls

SPEAKING AND LISTENING

Of all the major literacy skills- **reading, writing, speaking and listening**- it is the last two oral language skills that are probably the most neglected in our classrooms.

****Nearly every improvisation exercise teaches some aspect of listening and speaking!**

****STUDENTS ALSO NEED TO LEARN ABOUT EYE CONTACT, BODY LANGUAGE, AND GESTURE TO LEARN HOW THEY TOO CONTRIBUTE TO SPEAKING AND LISTENING.**

****DOING THE EXERCISES**

You can use these exercises, or games, to teach content, build classroom community, and develop cooperative learning skills!!

It's better to show than to try to explain too much! Trust the process. Embrace improvisation in the classroom and give yourself permission to engage in a process of discovery with your students.

No special materials needed. No set up or clean up. And once learned, most of the exercises take just a few minutes to play.

*Can be used as a reward, as part of a transition from one subject to the next, or simply as a way to refocus and reactivate students who have been sitting too long. Or -use it to reinforce the subject matter at hand.

SIDE: You'll find yourself establishing things like appropriate subjects, appropriate touching, appropriate language, etc.

CONDUCTED STORY

Overview: A group of players tells a single story, led by a conductor.

(Skills are developed in focus, oral communication, team building, self-confidence, and critical and creative problem solving.)

Instructions

- Divide the class into small groups, five to eight players each.
- Bring the first group onstage to form a back line.
- Ask the students in the line to form a curve, and to stand close together. This arrangement helps the players listen and focus on each other.
- Ask the audience for a suggestion for the story. There are several options for this prompt:
 - Title (for example, “Dad Buys a New Used Car,” “A Trip to the Mall,” “The Ferris Wheel That Got Stuck”)
 - Moral (examples: “Look Before You Leap,” “Let the Buyer Beware,” “Don’t Judge a Book by Its Cover”)
 - Title and genre (“The Amazing Magical Car: A Fairy Tale,” “The Night My Homework Was Lost in the Graveyard: A Horror Story” “Where Did the Teachers Go?” which is a mystery)
 - Topic (“Snakes,” “Cooking,” “Back-to-School Shopping”)
- The teacher, as the conductor, gets into position in front of the line, either sitting on a chair or kneeling. He points to one player, who then starts telling the story.
- ✱ • After the player has told a portion of the story, the conductor signals to the player to stop, while pointing to another player. The new player continues the story without hesitation—even if the switch occurs in the middle of a thought, word, or sentence.
- The game continues until all students have had a couple of turns.

Sidecoaching Sidecoaching isn’t recommended for Conducted Story. Players are concentrating on listening to the story, and additional words spoken by the teacher are too distracting.



Brief discussion after a round of Conducted Story can help students improve. These questions help students reflect on the game:

- Were you able to begin exactly where the last person left off? Or did you repeat the last couple of words before you continued?
- Did you get distracted? When? Why do you think you might have stopped listening?
- ✱ • Did you start planning the story in your head instead of listening?
- Did the story fit the title (or topic, or moral)?
- Did you speak clearly and loudly so that the audience and the other players could hear you?
- How is this different from creating a story on your own?

Tips

- Sometimes students want to recreate movies or television programs they've seen or create stories with familiar characters. A simple, positive prompt to redirect them is "Let's get the title of a story that has never, ever been told before."
- Strong, specific movements from the conductor will help the players stay focused and know when it is their turn.
- Encourage students to tell the story in third person. This supports the idea that it is one collective story, not a first-person narrative told by whoever began the story.
- As students improve, they will tell longer, more cohesive stories. In the beginning, it's fine to keep the rounds short.

Example 6-8 grade

- American Revolution - analyze key event
 - Make list of events: Draw one from hat or list
 - Tell the story of the event

- Like DWG GAME
- Like Move Specific

TAKE THAT BACK

Overview: This game is based in simple scenes. A moderator interrupts the scene periodically with the command to "take that back" so that players have to come up with alternative lines of dialogue.

Skills are developed in listening, focus, oral communication, critical and creative problem solving, and idea generation.

Instructions

- Invite two to four students into the playing area.
- Ask the audience for characters (who), an activity (what), and a setting (where) to start the scene.
- At key points, the teacher claps and calls out "Take that back!" and the last player who spoke must generate a new line of dialogue. Repeat this with the same player until three new lines of dialogue have been generated.
- Continue the scene until everyone has had the opportunity to generate new lines of dialogue.

1. Take it Back
2. Move Specific

Sidecoaching

"Say the first thing you think of!"

"Stay in the scene!"

"Look at your partner and react!"

Tips

- Sustained scenes require fairly advanced improvisation skills to execute effectively, but this simple scenic exercise is much easier for new improvisers and is an excellent way to introduce scene work.
- As students become more comfortable performing improvised scenes, introduce useful dialogue guidelines that help keep the scene moving forward:
 - Make statements rather than ask questions; questions have a way of bogging down a scene ("Where are you going?" "What are you doing?" "Why are we here?" throw responsibility onto the other person in the scene).
 - Avoiding questions supports each player in making bold, specific choices, which keep the scene vital.
 - "Yes, and ...": agree with and support what's happening in the scene.

Example

Teacher: OK, our "who" is four siblings, our activity ("what") is making breakfast, and our "where" is the family question. Go ahead and start.

Boaz: I want cornflakes.

Jessica: I'm going to make waffles. And you can't stop me.

Blaine: Jessica, you know Mom and Dad aren't home.

Teacher: Take that back.

Blaine: Jessica, you know that you're not supposed to use the waffle iron.

Teacher: Take that back!

Blaine: Jessica, you're going to burn the house down.

Teacher: Take that back!

Blaine: I'll get the waffle mix.

Wendy: You guys! Mom and Dad said don't use anything electrical.

Boaz: I'm just having cornflakes. So I won't be in trouble.

Teacher: Take that back!

Boaz: I'm just having cornflakes. And I'm telling on Blaine and Jessica.

Teacher: Take that back!

Boaz: I'd have cornflakes, so I wouldn't get in trouble, but it seems we're out.

Teacher: Take that back!

Boaz: I'm going to watch TV. Tell me if you need me to call the fire department.

Mark: Looks like the cord on this waffle iron is kind of frayed.

IMPROVISATION GAMES

9AD GAME

Overview: In small groups, students act as a creative team working to advertise a new product. Skills are developed in oral communication, team building, self-confidence, critical and creative problem solving, and idea generation.

Instructions

- Divide students into groups of five to eight.
- Send one group to the playing area to form a back line.
- Ask the audience for a suggestion for “a new product—something no one has seen before!”
- Tell the players that they are now an advertising team, and it is their job to describe this product and inform the public about how great it is.
- Players build on everything that is said by beginning each sentence with “Yes! And. . . .”

Sidecoaching

- “Say ‘Yes! And. . . .’”
- “Take that idea and tell us more!”

Example The audience suggestion is “a money-generating wallet.”

Marco: This great new product is a wallet—and it’s never empty.

William: Yes, and it’s full of hundred-dollar bills.

Anna: They grow on their own!

Teacher: Say “Yes, and. . . .”

Anna: Yes! And they grow on their own!

Ranjit: Yes, and all you have to do is water the wallet to make them grow.

Ellie: Yes, and the wallet is waterproof.

Gabriel: Yes, and the wallet can grow vegetables.

Marco: Uh—

Teacher: Take that idea and build on it!

Marco: Uh—

Teacher: The wallet can grow vegetables, yes! And. . .

Marco: —it can grow tomatoes!

Anna: Yes! And the wallet has a kitchen in it so you can cook the tomatoes.

Tips

- Have students brainstorm a list of several new products before you start. Then you won't have to pause in between exercises waiting for new suggestions; you can read them from your list.
- Use sidecoaching to keep the energy up and the ideas flowing, not to suggest your own ideas.
- All ideas are accepted and built on.
- "Yes, and . . ." is at the core of all improvisation and is a powerful tool for creating an environment that is conducive to cooperative learning.

Applicable Example 6-8th GRADE

On reading a novel in class students cast it as a movie, then create a campaign for the movie.

- Serves to review content
- Review critical elements of what was read.

Fr



DR. KNOW-IT-ALL

Overview: Small groups of students work together as one mind—the mind of Dr. Know-It-All—in a game that is similar to One-Word Story.

Skills are developed in listening, oral communication, team building, self-confidence, and critical and creative problem solving.

Instructions

- Set up three to eight chairs in a single row, facing forward, in the classroom playing area.
- Invite students into the playing area to sit on the chairs.
- Act as the moderator to field questions from the audience.
- Players answer the questions, each player giving just one word at a time.

Some answers may take the players two or more rounds to complete.

Sidecoaching

“Listen to each other!”

“Just say the next word!”

Instructor may also recap what has been said, or remind players of the question if they stall.

Example (Andy, Boaz, Dina, and Sabeeha are seated in chairs.)

Teacher: We’re very honored to have with us today Dr. Know-It-All, the world’s leading expert on all things. Let’s get a question for Dr. Know-It-All.

Nick: Dr. Know-It-All, how does a hurricane form?

Teacher: Ah, very interesting; what can you tell us about how hurricanes form, Dr. Know-It-All?

Andy: A

Boaz: hurricane

Dina: tries

Andy: Tries? That doesn’t make sense.

Teacher: “A hurricane tries . . .” Go on, Sabeeha; see what you can do with that.

Sabeeha: hard.

Andy: I don't get it.

Teacher: A hurricane tries hard. . . .

Andy: to

Boaz: blow

Dina: down

Sabeeha: everything.

(Silence.)

Teacher: How does a hurricane form? Dr. Know-It-All tells us that "A hurricane tries hard to blow down everything. . . ."

Andy: because!

Boaz: it

Dina: wants

Sabeeha: to

Andy: be important.

Teacher: Thank you, Dr. Know-It-All! Remember, one word at a time. Let's try another question; we've been studying hurricanes in Science, so let's see if Dr. Know-It-All knows her facts—or if we can stump her!

Nora: What is the biggest danger when a hurricane approaches?

Andy: Storm

Boaz: surge

Dina: according

Sabeeha: to

Andy: weather

Boaz: experts.

EXAMPLE - 5th - 8th

• Choose one character from a story or novel to be Dr. Knows-It
i.e. Scout from "To Kill A Mocking Bird"

"Why weren't you afraid of Boo?"

Tips

- The teacher can take a pretty firm hand as the moderator, making sense of crazy answers, steering the audience toward specific questions, suggesting topics.

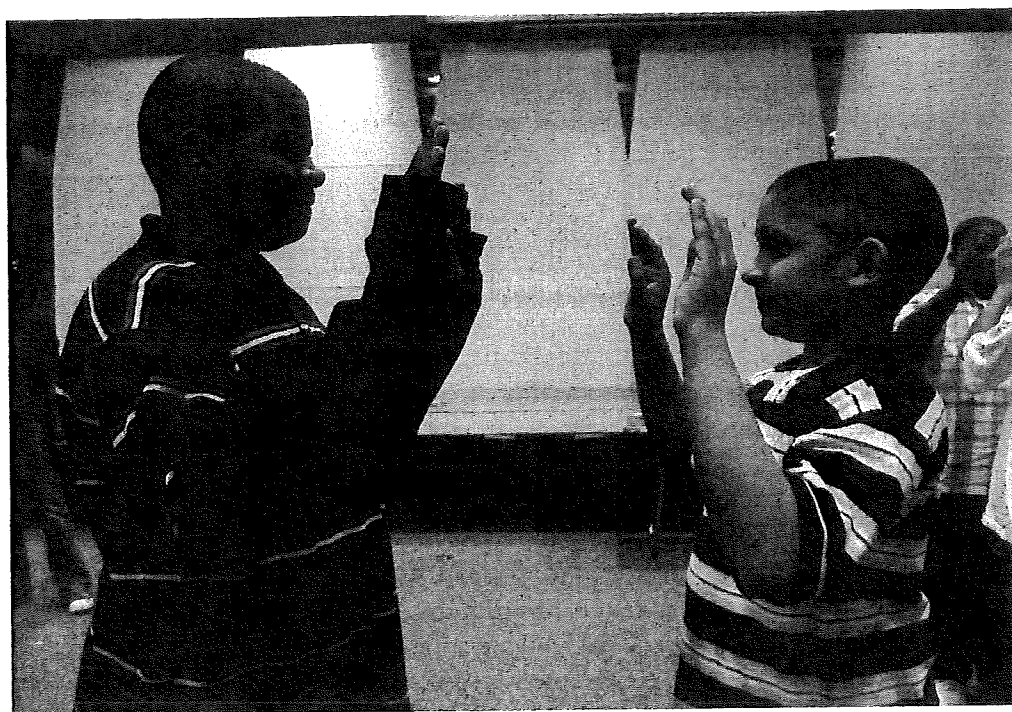
MIRROR

Overview: Pairs of students face each other and work together to mirror each other's movements.

Skills are developed in focus, empathy, self-awareness, and self-confidence.

Instructions

- Calling students up in pairs assigned by the teacher, bring either the whole class or half of the class into the playing area, depending on how much space is available.
- If the class has an odd number of students, three students can work together.
- Instruct the pairs of students to face each other.
- Tell the students to decide who is A and who is B in each pair.
- Tell the students that A is a person looking into a mirror, and that B is the image in that mirror.



These boys concentrate as they participate in "mirror."

- Instruct B to mirror A—posture, facial expression, breathing, arms folded, standing with more weight on one leg, and so on.
- On the teacher's signal, A may begin to move slowly as B follows.
- At any point, call "Freeze" and bring the attention of the class to one pair, asking, "Can you tell which one is the mirror?"
- Switch A to the mirror and B to the person looking in the mirror so that students can experience both sides of the exercise.

Sidecoaching

"Work together; we shouldn't be able to tell who's following and who's leading."

"Use your whole body."

"Use your faces."

"Support your mirror to follow you."

Tips

- Sometimes pairs of students try to trick each other, with the partner looking in the mirror deliberately trying to trick the mirror into making a mistake. Focusing on each pair and asking the audience if they can tell who is the mirror is a way to redirect their focus. Instead of tricking each other, they should be working together to trick the *audience*.
- Once students become adept at this exercise, pairs can switch roles at random, without prompting from the teacher.



OBJECT WORK

Overview: Object work is a broad term that denotes creating objects with mime techniques.

Skills are developed in focus, self-awareness, self-confidence, idea generation, and critical and creative problem solving.

Instructions

- Students can do this exercise at their desks.
- Tell students they are surrounded by space, and they can move their arms and hands through it quite easily because it is empty.
- Now, tell the students to move their hands forward until they feel a brick wall. Tell them to explore the brick wall with their hands, feeling the texture, temperature.
- Ask the students to tell you how the wall feels.
- Now, tell them to take their hands away from the wall.
- Tell the students to move their hands forward again until they reach a wall made of Jell-o. Tell them to squish their hands into it and move them around.
- Ask the students to tell you how it feels, how it smells.
- Tell them to grab a hunk and taste it. Ask them how it tastes.
- Tell them to take their hands out; it's time to wash them. They can pick up their favorite soap, smell it, lather up, rinse their hands, and dry them. Don't forget to shut off the faucet!

Other Ideas for Beginner Exercises

①

- Create a basketball (or softball, or football) out of thin air. Toss it up and down, score goals, bounce it against the ceiling, throw it up through the ceiling and into the sky above the school, throw it all the way into outer space, and let it fall back into the classroom again.

② ★

- Pull a present out of thin air and open it. Each student decides how big the package is and whether to tear the wrapping off quickly or carefully, and picks up the object. Students can explain what they received.
- Eating and drinking: guided by the teacher's instructions, students can enjoy object-work pizza, popcorn, milk and cookies, and other food or drink.

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More Advanced Object Work

- Students can do this in their chairs, or move into a large circle. This exercise works best with the whole class participating at once.
- The first person, either a student or the teacher, holds an imaginary object, feels it, uses it, and then passes it to the next person.
- This next person takes the object, and begins to feel its weight, size, texture. As he does so, the object begins to change in his hands. He reacts to the new dimensions of the object until the transformation is complete and then passes it to the next person.
- The process is repeated until all students have experienced it.

Example Tammy holds a small object in both hands. She then grasps one end in her fist and runs the other end on her open palm. She looks at the object, and then brings it to her head and starts stroking it across her hair. She passes it to Corey. He grasps it in his fist also, but it seems to grow heavier. As he pats the object against an open palm, it gets longer and longer until he grips it on one end with both fists. He taps one end on the ground, sets his feet wider and brings the object up to his shoulders in a baseball batter's stance. He then passes the object to Ibro, who holds it in one hand, feeling the weight. It gets lighter, and as he runs a hand across the changing object, it gets much thinner. He swings it back and forth in one hand, and then cranks a small wheel at one end of it.

Creating an Environment with Objects: Instructions

- Invite up to eight players into the playing space to get into a back line.
- In secret, help them choose a location.
- One by one, each player comes out and interacts with an object in the environment. More than one student can interact with the same object.
- The audience guesses the environment through the clues of the environment.

Example Ellie steps out of the back line and looks through a rack of clothes. Milla joins her and they hold up outfits on hangers in front of themselves and each other. Taishan comes out of the back line and stands, taking objects from a counter in front of him, looking at them, punching numbers into a machine, and placing the objects behind him. Corey enters the scene and stands by

Taishan, swiping a credit card in a reader and punching in numbers. Juan enters and stands by Corey, pulling items off a rack and putting them on the counter for Taishan to ring up. Marie enters, pushing a cart; she pulls items out of the cart and puts them on shelves. The audience guesses that they are in a store.

Sidecoaching

“What does that feel (taste, smell, sound, look) like?”

“How heavy (light) is that?”

“Feel that object in your hand; hold it!”

“Don’t show us the object; react to it.”

Tips

- Object work can be a great warm-up writing exercise.
- Younger students usually enjoy object-work exercises for their own sake, but sometimes older students need a stronger context or goal in order not to feel self-conscious with object work.
- Always encourage students to be as specific as possible; for example, if they’re eating pizza, ask them if it’s deep-dish or thin-crust. If they’re creating a store, ask them if it’s a grocery store or a hardware store.