

The roots of improvisation Ken Wilson



Ken Wilson is a trainer and ELT author with more than 25 titles to his name. His most recent book is *Smart Choice* (OUP). Ken first came to Brazil as an actor with the English Teaching Theatre in the 1980s. Subsequently, he has been here several times, attending BrazTESOL conferences and doing training sessions with teachers and students.

These training sessions often focus on ways to revitalize the classroom experience for both teachers and students, and are usually categorized by the catch-all expression 'drama'. However, Ken believes that the activities he demonstrates are actually improvisation rather than drama. He believes that a classroom approach which includes opportunities for improvisation and creativity is hugely beneficial to both teachers and students. Improvisation engages people's imagination, makes students more central to the learning process, and adds color and excitement to everyday classroom events. It can even enliven the presentation of 'new' grammar points.

In this article, he traces the roots of his own initiation into the mysteries of engaging the imagination of students and letting them take more control of the classroom process.

I'm a full-time writer now, but I've also been a teacher, a trainer, an actor, a theatre director, an audio producer, a skit writer, a musician and a singer/songwriter during my ELT career. I have learnt a lot from all the people I worked with - actors, writers, musicians, studio technicians and particularly students and other teachers and trainers.

Like all teachers, I have attended some ground-breaking and mind-changing courses, talks and workshops, which left a lasting impression on me and affected the work that I do. But the event which had more effect on the way I work than any other was a visit to a Central London comedy club in 1990. The club is called The Comedy Store and it has been one of London's most important comedy venues since 1979. It was there that I first saw the Comedy Store Players.

The Comedy Store Players

The Comedy Store Players are a group of improvisers - comedians and comedy actors - who first went on stage at the Store in 1985. They have performed twice a week since then. In 2007, the group is still going strong, with some of the original members still in the line-up. Some of them, like Paul Merton, are now household names on British TV and radio, but they still turn up on Wednesday and Sunday evening to entertain and amaze their fans.

So what do the Comedy Store Players do?

They improvise a series of skits, speeches, songs and games. They have no script, no set and no idea what was going to happen at the beginning of the evening, beyond a series of game formats which require the audience to provide them with the raw materials for what they do.

For example, they ask the audience for the name of a superhero, a household object and a location. The audience might give them Superman, a frying pan and New York City. They then improvise a story from these simple ingredients. In this activity, one of the actors directs the other five, pointing rapidly from one to another. Each one has to continue the sentence the previous one started, sometimes they have to continue from half way through a *word*. To make it all more dramatic and exciting, the audience are encouraged to shout 'DIE!!!' if a speaker stumbles over his words - and he/she is out!!!

This is one of the activities that I have adapted for classroom use. Let me say immediately that encouraging the students to shout 'DIE!' does NOT feature in the classroom adaptation!

When I first saw the Comedy Store Players, I was spellbound. The second time, I understood more how the magic worked. I still thought the six actors on stage were brilliantly talented, but I saw more clearly how these improvisation games worked. They are all based on rock-solid foundations and everyone, audience and performers, understands the rules completely. Moreover, I saw how they could work in the English classroom.

I did some research. How did the idea come about?

I discovered that the Comedy Store Players began when an American woman comedian, Kit Hollerbach, and a Canadian comedy actor, Mike Myers, arrived in London and taught some drama games that they had learnt in the US to English comedians and actors that they met. You may recognise the name Mike Myers. He is the actor who plays Austin Powers in the spoof spy movies.

I soon found out that Myers had learnt these games at a comedy club called Second City in Montreal, Canada. This club was an off-shoot of the original Second City Club in Chicago. And a name that crops up whenever the Chicago club is mentioned is Paul Sills. I was delighted when I found out that Sills was the son of legendary Theater Games creator Viola Spolin, who I already knew about. It meant that all this fun and creativity had some serious educational roots!

Viola Spolin (1906-1994)

Viola Spolin is most famous as the theater educator and director who devised the Theater Games system of actor training. However, long before she had anything to do with theater, she had trained in the 1920s to be a settlement worker. A settlement worker's job is to help new Americans to integrate into the society where they find themselves when they re-locate in the US.

She studied at the Recreational Training School (RTS) in Chicago, a revolutionary organization founded by a remarkable woman called Neva Boyd. Boyd also deserves a special mention here. The RTS trained teachers in the art of group games, drama and play theory, with specific reference to dealing with young people from areas of social deprivation. Imagine! This was all happening in the 1920s!

Boyd's innovative teaching strongly influenced Spolin, as did the use of traditional game structures to influence social behavior in inner-city and immigrant children. Spolin put her training to work later, when she worked as a drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA was an organization created in 1935 on the orders of President Franklin D Roosevelt as part of the New Deal to help millions of people affected by the Great Depression.

Spolin soon discovered that traditional methods of teaching and training were no use to her in these deprived urban surroundings. She realised that she needed to work out some kind of training that could cross the cultural and ethnic barriers within the WPA Project. And she had to do it quickly.

You have to remember that Spolin wasn't working with actors or fee-paying students. She was working with immigrants who had language communication difficulties and a whole lot of other problems in their lives. As often happens with communities such as this, the new arrivals found themselves living in ghetto areas, with all the social unrest that this can bring. We sometimes think of ghettos as being a problem of the late 20th century, but things were dreadful in Chicago in the 1930s, as the country fought its way out of the Great Depression.

So imagine the situation. Viola Spolin and a room full of suspicious new Americans with language difficulties, plus other ghetto inhabitants that the social services had placed in the group because they didn't know what else to do with them. With no material to work with, Spolin devised her own way of communicating with these people, and helping them communicate with each other.

She did this by allowing them to play. Building upon what she had learnt from Neva Boyd, Spolin developed a series of games which adapted the concept of play to help them with 'creative self-expression'. "The games emerged out of necessity," she said. "I didn't sit at home and dream them up. When I had a problem, I made up a game. When another problem came up, I just made up a new game."

Spolin was in danger of burn-out working in the ghettos, and she decided to go back to her other love, theater. The techniques she devised working at the WPA became the basis of her Theater Games system (see bibliography below for more details) and in 1946, she went to Hollywood and founded the Young Actors' Company. There, she trained children and young people in performance skills using the Theater Games system.

In 1963, she published *Improvisation for the Theater*, which contained more than 200 games and improvisation exercises. It has become a classic reference text for teachers of acting in the US, as well as for educators in other fields. Spolin's Theater Games transform complicated theater conventions and techniques into simple game formats. The playing emerges naturally and spontaneously; the exercises are, as one reviewer wrote, "designed to almost fool people into being spontaneous."

There are games to free the actor's tension, games to "cleanse" the actor of subjective preconceptions of the meaning of words, relationship and character games, games of concentration - all areas that actors in training have to deal with. To achieve the games' purpose, all you need are an understanding of the rules, the players (both actors and audience are considered to be players), and a space in which to play.

The Young Actors' Company continued until 1955, after which Spolin returned to Chicago, where she conducted games workshops with the Compass Group, the country's first professional improvisation theater company.

And this is where her son Paul Sills comes into the picture. He was white, a product of a white suburb, and affluent, and he wasn't planning to become an actor, so theoretically, the games originally devised by his mother weren't aimed at him or people like him.

How wrong did THAT notion turn out to be! Sills found the games engaging and - importantly - hilariously funny. He taught them to his fellow students at the University of Chicago, and this led to the establishment of the Second City Comedy Club.

Second City Club, Chicago

Second City can lay claim to be the first improvisation comedy club in the world. The club was a development of Spolin's Compass Group, and the original players were all Chicago undergraduates. The name of the club made fun of the disdainful attitude of New Yorkers to Chicago. Shortly before the establishment of the club, the *New Yorker* magazine had published an article by A J Liebling which made fun of Chicago's pretensions to be the second city of the USA.

Well, New York had nothing like the Second City Club! The first show was performed there in 1959. In the beginning, some of the material was scripted, but the audience reacted better to (and laughed louder at) the improvised material. Many of the performers at Second City went on to star in the classic TV series *Saturday Night Live*. Film stars Bill Murray and Dan Akroyd performed there. And of course, Second City opened a separate club in Montreal. Mike Myers joined ... and we come back to the beginning of the story - the Comedy Store Players in London.

So ... what does all this have to do with teaching???

Classroom application

Several of the Comedy Store games can be used in the classroom, almost in their original form. Here are one or two thoughts about how to adapt them

1 Superhero, household object and location

Choose a team of three, four or five students, who sit in a line. Another student is the director. Ask the rest of the class for the three items you need, and then tell the director to point at someone to start the story.

Important: there should be no pressure on any student to say more than they want. If they run out of steam, the director must move on. Equally, the director should move on even if someone is in full flow.

Follow-up: The rest of the class make notes and write the story for homework. The students who performed the story are excused homework!

2 Experts

Three students sit next to each other and you tell them that they are experts. However, they don't know what they are experts about. The rest of the class have to choose their area of expertise. Let's say the class chooses 'fish'. The class then ask question about fish to the experts. The experts answer, but only one word each. Example:

Question: *What is the best fish to eat?*

Answer:

Expert 1: *I ...*

Expert 2: *...think ...*

Expert 3: *... that...*

Expert 1: *.. the ... etc etc*

Important: Only three questions per group of experts, then change. Choose a new group of experts and a new area of expertise. Also, don't expect long answers. Stop the answers after they get a laugh from the rest of the class.

Conclusion

The level of creativity in these activities seems immense, but it's actually quite simple. Very often, you just have to say the first thing that comes into your mind. But the feeling of achievement IS immense!

The one thing I only briefly referred to in the above is the importance of laughter. When students embark on these flights of creativity, the rest of the class watch with enormous concentration, as people do when they are watching their favourite comedian, or a comic actor in a movie. Getting students to listen to each other is often hard, but not when you are playing games like these.

Ken Wilson is currently compiling a book of his own drama and improvisation activities, which will be published by Oxford University Press.

Bibliography

Improvisation for the Theatre (Northwestern University Press, 1963)

Theatre Games for Rehearsal (Northwestern University Press 1985)

Theatre Games for the Classroom (1986)

All the above books are by Viola Spolin

I also recommend these books:

Impro - Improvisation and the Theatre Keith Johnstone (Methuen 1981)

Theatre Games - Clive Barker (Methuen 1977)