

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: The Art of Improvisation
Subject: 3 for All
Discipline: Theatre

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Tim Orr and Stephen Keirin of *3 for All* improvise a scene. Still image from SPARK story, February 2004.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

The Art of Improvisation

SUBJECT

3 for All

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

Understand the development of improvisation and its relationship to broader social themes and ideas, abstract concepts, and the history of art

STORY SYNOPSIS

Widely regarded as three of the Bay Area's most talented and entertaining improvisational artists, Rafe Chase, Tim Orr and Stephen Kearin perform together just a few times a year as 3 For All. Spark is there as these brave performers walk a theatrical high wire together, hitting the stage without a script and turning audience suggestions into narrative stories that amaze and amuse.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing as a group

Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance

Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently

Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another

Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To introduce students to the concept of improvisation

To provide context for the understanding of improvisation in theatre

To inspire students to integrate improvisation and improvisational thinking in their lives

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story "The Art of Improvisation" about Bay Area comedy improv group 3 for All on DVD or VHS and the appropriate player

Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sounds card, printer

Cassette player, CD player, or computer audio program

MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers

Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Bodily-Kinesthetic - control of one's own body, control in handling objects

Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Spatial - ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems

Logical-Mathematical - ability to detect patterns, reason deductively, think logically



See more information on
[Multiple Intelligences at
www.kqed.org/spark/education.](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education)

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Widely regarded as some of the Bay Area's most talented and entertaining improvisational artists, Rafe Chase, Tim Orr, and Stephen Kearin perform together as 3 for All. In "The Art of Improvisation," Spark follows these three brave performers as they walk a theatrical high wire together, hitting the stage without a script and turning audience suggestions into narrative stories that amaze and amuse.

The trio met in the late-'80s through the improv company Bay Area Theatresports (BATS) and formed an ensemble in the summer of 1996 to pursue their distinctive brand of high-stakes improvisation. Driven by the artistic principle of "a stage with no rules," 3 for All hits the floor without a script, set format, props, or any safety net—armed only with their dedication to making their audiences roll with laughter. The actors work with musical and lighting improvisers, twisting audience suggestions into narratives lasting from a few minutes to over an hour.

In this kind of performance, actors improvise scenes and skits without preparation, making use only of what is available to them at that moment. While most actors spend countless hours getting into character, the players in 3 for All need to be able to invent personas and lines on the spot, working off the surges of adrenaline that come with spontaneous creativity. Nothing is rehearsed, nothing is discussed before or during shows, and nothing is held over or re-worked in future shows.

Though the members of the trio meet regularly to stay connected to one another, prior to the performance they engage in theatre games and physical coordination activities to refresh their familiarity. This connection and familiarity between team members—getting to know how each member thinks and responds—is crucial to successful improvisation.

Familiarity and experience as a group can be a tremendous asset in the creation of skits and scenes that work. In addition to this, there are three basic rules of improvisation:

- 1) Always say “yes” – no matter what your teammates do or say, greet them positively and contribute to the forward momentum of the experience
- 2) No one gets hurt – show respect for your teammates by supporting them and encouraging their full participation
- 3) Have fun!

While it looks easy, balancing these rules while also entertaining an audience is very difficult. It requires an actor to be completely present in the moment, to respond positively and creatively to their teammates, to contribute his/her own creative input to make the scene successful, and to involve and connect with an audience.



3 For All members Rafe Chase, Tim Orr, and Stephen Kearin improvise a scene. Still image from SPARK story, 2003.

CONTENT OVERVIEW (continued)

All the members of 3 for All also work to pass on their skills to others. Chase, a founding member of Improv Theatre as well as other local groups, teaches improv for BATS and A.C.T., and in private classes. Kearin is a visiting instructor at Stanford University and has recently appeared on HBO's "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and a pilot of "The Phil Fuller Show." Orr, like Chase, teaches improv at BATS and A.C.T., in addition to having been cast in Bay Area plays and Brien Burrough's improvised films Suckerfish and Security. In February, 2003, 3 for All released their first, self-titled, CD.

THE BIG PICTURE

Improvisational theatre has its roots in theatre games -- a techniques developed to help actors cultivate different performance skills. Actress, director, and producer Viola Spolin (1904-1996) is generally credited with developing theatre games as a strategy to work with young people in the Recreational Project of the Works Progress Administration in 1939-1940.

Theatre games focus upon the individual, helping one cultivate creativity, and use play to unlock the capacity for creative self-expression. The simple structures change complicated theatre techniques into games that are fun to play while very helpful and instructive for the players' crafts. Each game is built upon a specific issue or technical problem, which encourages freedom and immediate response to help actors from becoming self-conscious when performing.

Within to the three cardinal rules of improvisation (*always say "yes," no one gets hurt, and have fun*) outlined by Three for All are finer points to which improvisers adhere in order to create a successful scene. For instance, within *always say "yes"* is the idea of agreement -- agreeing with the action or dialogue at hand and moving to extend it, rather than halt it. This means when one person initiates a scene with an action or a statement, the other person must agree, making his or her best deduction as to what is going on or what direction the dialogue is headed. This does not however necessarily mean that the performers have to share the same opinion about what they are doing. The important thing is to keep the scene moving.

Here's an example. One character walks out and attempts to lift a heavy invisible object. The next person walks on and says "What are you doing?" The first says "I can't lift this box." Now, if the second person denies that the box exists, the scene cannot go forward. One thing they can do that will keep the scene moving forward is to attempt to help the first person lift the box. They could also wheel in an invisible dolly, or contrive another way to move the box. All of the solutions involve agreement -- there is a box and the person cannot move it. These move the scene forward. Not agreeing, or denying that there is a box, would halt the scene.

Once performers understand the basic skills and can successfully move scenes forward, other aspects of a scene can be practiced, such as building character and relationships. Building one or both of these enriches a scene, creating additional levels of depth between the characters and making a scene more complex. With character development, the dialogue and actions originate in a personality, enabling a performer to make his or her choices based on conveying a particular type of character, expanding both the dialogue and the action outwards in a manner that the other actors can apprehend and play with. Relationships add yet another layer, informing how the characters relate to one another and enabling them to play within yet another realm of informed choices.



Rafe Chase, Tim Orr, and Stephen Kearin improvise a scene in a performance.
Still image from SPARK story, 2003.

THE BIG PICTURE (continued)

Although different performers describe the benefits of improvisation differently depending upon how they understand its usefulness, all agree that the audience is tantamount to success because the entirety of the activity is *in the moment*, including the interplay between the audience and the performers. This importance is expressed most directly in the fact that improv audiences often offer suggestions for scenes, conflicts, and theatrical styles and formats for the performers, contributing directly to the action on stage.

Another example of how audiences factor in meaningful ways in improvisation is the practice of the Brazilian actor and teacher Augusto Boal who is founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, an improvisational theatre style which involves actors and non-actors in theatrical experiences that explore how oppression appears in our societies, and how we might fight it.

SECTION III – RESOURCES

TEXTS

Goldberg, Andy. Improv Comedy. New York: S. French Co., 1991. - Improv Comedy is a useful text for writers or anyone else who wishes to study the basics of controlled spontaneity as a path to believable humor.

Johnstone, Keith and Irving Wardle. Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre. London and New York: Routledge, 1987. - A fantastic book on improv written in a stream of consciousness fashion and provides lessons that apply not only to improv but to learning, life and personal growth. The emphasis on learning through experience and learning to accept mistakes as part of the learning process is inspiring.

Jones, Brie. Improve with Improv! A Guide to Improvisation and Character Development. New York: Meriwether Publishers, 1993. - This book is a complete improv curriculum program divided into twenty class-length workshops. Each workshop contains carefully selected exercises designed to help students focus on one aspect of a character's personality.

Nevraumont, Edward J and Nicholas P. Hanson. The Ultimate Improv Book: A Complete Guide to Comedy Improvisation. New York: Meriwether Publishers, 1992. - A guide to comedy improvisation designed especially for educators, featuring 24 class-length lessons covering skills, structuring, and strategies, with tips on starting an improvisation team, games, and activities.

Seham, Amy E. Whose Improv is it Anyway? Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. - This book not only examines the history of improvisation in Chicago, the author also broadens the perspectives to race, gender, and power in improv in general.

WEB SITES

AHS Arts High School - Theatre resources, books , media, and Web sites - <http://www.pcae.k12.mn.us/school/theatre/resources.html>

ARTSEEDGE – The Kennedy Center arts education site. - <http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/artsedge.html>

ArtsWork –Theatre Education site gives resources and links on instructional and assessment strategies, activities, lesson plans etc. - <http://artswork.asu.edu/arts/teachers/resources/theatre1.htm>

Learn Improv - simple site is devoted to learning improvisational comedy. - <http://www.learnimprov.com/>

Listing on improvisation theatre groups in the US including a Bay Area listing. - <http://www.lowrent.net/improv/groups-usa.html#CA>

Ms. Stanley East Bakersfield High School - Fun games, lesson plans, exercises for high school students. - <http://www.khsd.k12.ca.us/east/library/improv.htm>

The Improv Encyclopedia - a collection of games, exercises, handles, and techniques for improvisational theatre. - <http://www.humanpingpongball.com/FAQ.html>

The Improv Page - a clearinghouse for information about improvisational theatre including history, groups, games, performers, terms etc. - <http://www.improvcomedy.org/>

Improvisation Theatre Resource Site – Acting classes, performance, community, and drama in the Bay Area - http://www.pantheatre.com/Improv_Links.htm

WEB SITES (continued)

The Improv Links – Theatresports and Keith Johnstone holds improv workshops in San Francisco - <http://www.keithjohnstone.com/>

Pear Avenue Theatre – Improv classes for all levels. - <http://www.thepear.org/classes.htm>

MEDIA

Creative Drama & Improvisation, Theatre Video Series, DVC Inc., 1990. (Available through Amazon at www.amazon.com)

Whose Line Is It Anyway? (television series on ABC) Featuring Ryan Stiles, Wayne Brady, and Colin Mocherie, hosted by Drew Carrey. Guest appearances by Greg Proops and others. Check your local listing for schedule.

Suckerfish - An improvised movie which stars members of Bay Area Theatresports™ True Fiction Magazine, and Scratch Theatre. Directed by Brien Burroughs. 1999.

BAY AREA RESOURCES

Bay Area Theatresports™ (BATS)
A San Francisco-based non-profit with the mission to develop the art form of improvisational theatre by introducing the excitement of live theatre to the diverse populations of the Bay Area.
<http://www.arts4learning.org/programs.aspx?pid=259>.
B350 Fort Mason Center
San Francisco, California 94123
Phone: 415/474.6776
To book BATS into a school or other site for students, contact Young Audiences of Northern California at <http://www.yabayarea.org> or 415/974.5554.

Craigslist – check the Event calendar for both classes and events. - www.craigslist.org

East Bay Improv™
<http://www.eastbayimprov.com>
Various East Bay locations
Phone: 510/964.0571

BAY AREA RESOURCES (continued)

ImprovWorks
<http://www.improvworks.org>
info@improvworks.org
Various Bay Area locations
Phone: 415/863.9500

National Comedy Theatre, San Jose
the Northern California Bay Area home of ComedySportz, a competitive, team improvisational comedy, played just like a sport.
<http://www.national-comedy.com>
58 S. 1st Street (inside Bella Mia Restaurant)
San Jose, CA
Business Line: 408/224.0842
Reservations: 408/985.5233
E-mail: jeff@national-comedy.com

The Un-Scripted Theater Company
Improv performances and workshops
<http://www.un-scripted.com/index.htm>
Various Bay Area locations
Phone: 415/869-5384

C.A.F.E. Off-Market Theatres
<http://www.cafearts.com>
965 Mission (@ 5th)
San Francisco, CA
Phone: 415/896.6477
Email: info@offmarkettheater.com

SECTION IV – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Adrenaline

A hormone produced and secreted by the adrenal glands, which increases circulation and muscular activity during periods of stimulation or excitement

Characterization

The development and portrayal of a personality through thought, action, dialogue, costuming, and makeup

Flexible

Adaptable; able to work in different ways, responsive to circumstances as they arise

Gibberish

Unintelligible speech, meaningless sounds

Improvisation

A spontaneous style of theatre in which scenes (or skits) are created by actors interacting with one another without prior rehearsal or a pre-written script; to make something from nothing; the art of living in the moment.

Macramé

The art of knotting cord or string in interesting patterns

Mainstream

An established form, prevailing fashion, or an opinion or way of doing something that generally conforms with a majority.

Psychobabble

Incoherent language drawing on psychology, referencing psychotherapeutic terminology in an incoherent and foolish way

Reverberate

To echo or resound

Telepathy

Strong communication between distinct minds of different people through a form of transference of information other than through the five senses of touch, see, hear, feel, and smell

SECTION V – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

The Art of Improvisation

In the SPARK story, the members of *3 For All* talk about their upcoming performance, explaining that every time they perform, they have “absolutely nothing planned,” “everything is new”, and they do “not know what comes next.” Initiate a conversation with students about the art of improvisation.

- What qualities do the performers need?
- Do they need training? If so, what kind?
- Is it possible that they have “absolutely nothing planned”?
- What do the members of *3 For All* depend upon?

Discuss the responses of the students to these questions. Ask students to watch the SPARK story again and to identify the elements that make *3 For All* successful as improvisational artists. Help the group identify the key elements described in the segment – mutual trust, teamwork, telepathy, commitment, close friendship.

In addition, encourage the group to identify further important skills, such as good vocabulary, wit, physical agility, good timing (physical and verbal), expressive body language, collaborative spirit, etc. Explore the importance of each of these elements with the group, looking for examples in their own lives when these attributes have been important and contributed to a successful collaborative venture.

IMPROV SPARKLERS:

◎ Sit in a tight circle and write down the opening line of a story and pass it to the person sitting to your left. Challenge each participant to add a sentence and pass the story on to person to the left. The last person to add a sentence should then read the story aloud to the group.

◎ This activity can be done verbally, which would then omit the final reading, but call upon the participants to listen to and remember what came before. Consider making the opening line something exciting or evocative such as “Suddenly last summer I discovered...” or “When the door opened Matilda screamed...”

◎ Divide participants into improv groups of three to appear before the class in turn. Challenge the rest of the group to call out two different descriptive words (known as triggers) to help the trio develop a short improvised scene. The triggers should include character, subject, setting, genre, mood, and style. The performing trios should then prepare a short scene combining the elements proposed. For instance, they might develop a scene about ketchup in the style of a horror film. Or they might develop a scene about homework on a train. Once the group gets the hang of it, you can increase to three or four triggers.

RELATED STANDARDS - THEATRE

Grade 9-12

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Development of Theatrical Skills

2.1 Make acting choices, using script analysis, character research, reflection, and revision through the rehearsal process.

Creation/Invention in Theatre

2.2 Write dialogues and scenes, applying basic dramatic structure: exposition, complication, conflict, crises, climax, and resolution.

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

4.2 Report on how a specific actor used drama to convey meaning in performances

Icebreaker Activity – In the Manner of...

Explain the idea that each student will act out the same scenario in a different style. Select the scenarios, such as inspecting or buying a mattress, mailing a box at the post office, or talking to an attorney on the telephone. Provide each student with a card that tells her/him the style in which s/he should execute this scene in front of the group. The card will specify the style for the scene. For example, buy a mattress “in the manner of...”

The group will then attempt to guess the style they are enacting (i.e. what is written on their card).

These are some examples – in the manner of ...

A Shakespearean character
Arnold Schwarzenegger
Romantic film star
Clint Eastwood
Country-Western character
Hip-Hop/Rock star
Sherlock Holmes
A Valley girl
A Hillbilly
Other options

After each student has performed, review the exercise as a group. Invite students to comment on the challenges of the exercise. What might hold them back? Which scenes were effective and why?

Theatrical Genre

Introduce the concept of theatrical genre to the group. In literary and dramatic studies, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally tragedy and comedy. The term can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historic era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to a sub-genre of tragedy and comedy, such as romantic comedy. (SPARKed Tools at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>).

Each dramatic form operates according to conventions and, in turn, audiences bring expectations to a performance. For example in tragedy, there is a narrative with a beginning a middle and an end. There is also an expectation of a conflict, foul play and an unhappy, but meaningful ending.

In Greek tragedy, fundamental questions underpin the drama, such as - what is the meaning of choice and responsibility, of evil and suffering? How can a person be both an individual with free will and a part of society and the universe?

Have students watch the *3 For All* story carefully and, working in groups, respond to the following questions:

- What are the conventions? Are there any defining features, set routines or patterns?
- Is improvisational theatre appears to be totally unplanned, without a set form or structure?
- What expectations do the audiences bring?
- Is there a beginning, a middle and an end?
- Is there a philosophy or set of guiding ideas or principles?

Invite each group to share their responses and discuss the issues. Ask students to write a 500-1,500 word essay on *3 For All*'s improvisational theatre.

RELATED STANDARDS

LANGUAGE ARTS

Grades 9 & 10

2.1 Write biographical or autobiographical narratives or short stories:

- Relate a sequence of events and communicate the significance of the events to the audience.
- Locate scenes and incidents in specific places.
- Describe with concrete sensory details the sights, sounds, and smells of a scene and the specific actions, movements, gestures, and feelings of the characters; use interior monologue to depict the characters' feelings.
- Pace the presentation of actions to accommodate changes in time and mood.
- Make effective use of descriptions of appearance, images, shifting perspectives, and sensory details.

Attending a Performance

From the Resource section in this guide, encourage students to attend a performance of one improvisation theatre group and gather information to share with the class, for example, the program, information pack, listings etc. Encourage students to prepare a review of the performance addressing:

- Was it enjoyable?
- What was it about?
- Who were the performers?
- What were the main elements?
- What skills do you think were needed?
- Are they similar or different to *3 For All*?
- Would you consider attending a class or workshop?

Have students gather theatre reviews from newspapers and compare them for structure, style and approach. Ask them to then write up their review and send it to the Bay Area Guardian or a local free sheet.

IMPROV SPARKLER:

© Watch and talk about the SPARK story. Stand in front of the class one at a time to improvise a speech. Ask another student in the class to pick the topic and provide a stopwatch or clock for a third student to time the speech. Begin with 20-30 seconds, but extend the time as students improve and become less nervous. After everyone has spoken at least once, ask each of them to consider how well they spoke, what points were important to communicate, and what points were omitted. This activity can also be accomplished with a range of content, such as a book recently read, or an assignment recently completed.

RELATED STANDARDS

THEATRE

Grade 7

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

Derivation of Meaning from Works of Theatre

- 4.2 Explain how cultural influences affect the content or meaning of works of theatre.

Grade 8

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

- 4.1 Develop criteria and write a formal review of a theatrical production

Grades 9-12, Proficient

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Development of the Vocabulary of Theatre

Use the vocabulary of theatre, such as acting values, style, genre, design, and theme, to describe theatrical experiences.

Comprehension and Analysis of the Elements of Theatre

- 1.2 Document observations and perceptions of production elements, noting mood, pacing, and use of space through class discussion and reflective writing.

4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

- 4.2 Report on how a specific actor used drama to convey meaning in performances

5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

Connections and Applications

- 5.1 Describe how skills acquired in theatre may be applied to other content areas and careers.

Careers and Career-Related Skills

- 5.2 Manage time, prioritize responsibilities, and meet completion deadlines for a production as specified by group leaders, team members, or directors.
- 5.3 Demonstrate an understanding of the professional standards of the actor, director, scriptwriter, and technical artist, such as the requirements for union membership.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/>