

Create Your Own Comedy Show Curriculum

Class on Devised Theatre and Improvisation for ages 10 - 14

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A Saint Mary's University of MN Theatre Department TA499 Project

Learning Objectives:

- ★ Gain artistic confidence
- ★ Work in an ensemble
- ★ Create stories using basic plot structures
- ★ Improvisation techniques such as gift giving and establishing relationships
- ★ Life skills such as compromising and articulating ideas

A Note on Teaching Ensemble Creation:

This curriculum is designed to be adapted. No two groups will ever function the same, and exercises should be altered or removed to meet the needs of the specific ensemble. What I have created is a framework to work off of when teaching a class on devising techniques. It is based off of the class I taught with MCA and should not necessarily be followed exactly depending on a class's ensemble dynamics. Flexibility and spur of the moment decision making is key to a successful ensemble being created.

Schedule:

Day One:

Objective: Creating the Ensemble

➤ *Establishing the Class Dynamic*

I always begin a class with sitting in a circle with students and introducing myself and what the class is going to be about. I then ask students to introduce themselves and what made them interested in the class - this will guide me in what the group will be most interested in and what I should focus on including.

Instead of spending time with me lecturing the students on class rules and expectations, I then have everyone collaborate in creating a “classroom contract.” This makes the process of creating boundaries for the class more collaborative. If the students get a say in what the rules are, they are more likely to follow them. This also establishes right away that this will be a hands on collaborative class. I have students come up with expectations for themselves as well as their expectations for me as their teacher. Again, this makes them feel more involved and tells me more about what kind of learning environment they are looking for so that I can tailor the curriculum to what they will respond to best. Once the expectations are written out, I have everyone in the class, myself included, sign our “contract.” This will aid in accountability: if any student breaks any of the rules we as a group just came up with, the contract can be brought out where they will see their signature agreeing to the classroom “terms” that they themselves created. It also once again encourages the group ensemble dynamic that is necessary in this kind of theatre creation.

➤ *Name Zap*

This is a name game that’s a little more engaging than the basic action name game that classes usually utilize. See Games Compendium for description

➤ *Machine and Orchestra*

I begin with these two games because they are physically engaging and focus on listening and ensemble creation, which are going to be the most crucial skills to establish before any actual improvising or devising begins. See Games Compendium for descriptions.

➤ *Create-a-Commercial*

This game continues the ensemble creation while now introducing the idea of devising in a succinct and structured way, which will transition well into the final part of the day. See Games Compendium for description.

➤ *Establishing the Idea Board*

The idea board will be present throughout the class, everyday. Using sticky notes students can put up any ideas for their play that ever come up during class time - an improv scene that could be expanded into a scene for the play, a line they would like to say, names for characters, plot points, etc. For this class, brainstorm with students a few basic ideas to put up to start the idea board. Some suggestions may include: Things they find funny (This could be used as an opportunity to teach some basic comedy concepts such as the rule of threes and the need for conflict), kinds of plays they like, or what their favorite topics to talk about are.

Day Two:

Objective: Listening

- Warm up: *Purse*
This game is a great warm-up for introducing the idea of listening. See Games Compendium for description.
- *Mirror Exercise*
One of the challenges for students when learning to listen in scenes is to focus on something other than themselves, so I use this game to force them to focus on something outside of themselves and put all their choices into the power of their scene partner. See Games Compendium for description.
- *Gibberish Scenes*
Another obstacle for students attempting to listen is the obsession with what they are going to say. They are desperate to say something funny, which means that is all they are thinking about and they end up not hearing anything their scene partner says to them in any comprehensive way. This game removes all use of language and relies on students focusing on the inflection and body language their partner is using to determine what is happening. See Games Compendium for description.
- *30 Second Fairytales*
I use this game that requires heavy collaboration to transition from the listening exercises students have been doing to their devising work. See Games Compendium for description.
- Idea Board Brainstorming
The last 5 to 10 minutes of class should be used brainstorming some more at the idea board. By the end of the time, the class should establish what kind of show they want to create or a specific style for the play. As an example, my class decided on a murder mystery show.

Day Three:

Objective: Character Creation

- Warm up
- *Here Comes the Waiter*
This is a great game for loosening students up and making them feel comfortable being weird characters around each other. It may even provide inspiration for the next activity at the idea board. See Games Compendium for description.
- Character Creation at the idea board
Now that the style of play has been created, brainstorm character types that might be present in that style of show. Allow students free range in coming up with what character they want to be, just offer guidance in finding how characters may fit into the style play you are creating.
- Character Dossiers
Spend the rest of class time working on creating character dossiers (descriptions). Have the students draw pictures of their characters and answer a variety of questions to aid in their

creation. Examples may include: Who are they friends with, who are their enemies, what three words would you use to describe them, why are they a part of this story, etc.

Day Four:

Objective: Gift Giving

➤ Warm up

➤ Review Characters

For review, have students present their character dossiers that they created the last class. This will also give them the chance to describe in detail their characters to their peers, which they are often desperate to do.

➤ *Party Quirks*

This game continues work on previous learning objectives of character creation and listening while adding the new idea of gift giving. Gift giving refers to you doing what you can to help the other actors on stage with you. Instead of trying to make the scene all about yourself, what can you do to make sure others on stage are not struggling. For this game in particular, how can you help the party host guess your quirk. Remind students that the goal of the game is to have the party host guess all the quirks, not to be the last guest unguessed to stress the importance of gift giving. See Games Compendium for description.

➤ *Frogger*

With the time remaining, This game is one that's easy to understand and will be a fun and energizing way to conclude class. Depending on how successful students were with the concept of gift giving, this game may be a welcome brain destressor before leaving for the day. See Games Compendium for description.

Day Five:

Objective: Importance of Conflict

➤ Warm-up

➤ *Story Pitches*

At this point in the process students will have a lot of their own ideas that they just need to let out. This exercise will give them the opportunity to do just that while having someone's undivided attention. See Games Compendium for description.

➤ Brainstorming Events/Problems/Conflicts

Have students come back to the idea board to discuss what they heard in their story pitches. Discuss whether any of the stories sounded complete or not. Often the students will focus on their own characters' part in the story and not come up with any plot points that affect the story in any major way. This is a teaching moment for why stories need conflict. Brainstorm some conflicts, also referred to as events or problems, that could happen in their play.

➤ *Assassins*

Since this day involves a lot of sitting down and brainstorming, ending with this kind of game is a great way to make sure students leave as excited and energized as they came. See Games Compendium for description.

Day Six:

Objective: Story Structure

- Warm Up
- Story Structure Lesson
Begin with having students brainstorm what is needed for a story. The final list should include things like: Conflict, and beginning middle and end, language, an audience, and characters. Then draw out for them a basic plot structure. Discuss inciting incidents, rising action, climax, etc. This information is necessary but may feel too much like school, so I have children interact by helping to draw the plot diagrams and being as physical as possible during the lesson.
- *One Sentence Stories*
Have students apply what they just learned using this game. See Games Compendium for description.
- *Story Story Die*
Use this game to further continue to apply the concept of story structure. See Games Compendium for description.
- Idea Board: Put Together the Plot
In the last part of class, come to the idea board to look at all that has been created. Using what they learned about story structure, have them take the events they created last class and put them in an order to create their plot. Add more events as necessary.

Day Seven:

Objective: Establishing

- Warm-up
- *30 Second Relationships*
Use this game as a way of introducing the idea of establishing relationships in scenes. Establishing a relationship does not need to be done literally by declaring the relationship, but can be assumed based on body language and repartee. See Games Compendium for description.
- *3 Headed Expert*
This game is meant as practice in establishing characters and relationships. See Games Compendium for description.
- Devise Establishing scene for the Play
Use what they have learned about establishing characters and relationships to devise the first scene in the play where we meet all the characters.

Day Eight:

Objective: Review

- Warm-up
- *Character Interviews*
Review characters and further develop them using this game.
- Run Establishing Scene
- *Ensemble Obstacles*
Use this game as a midway booster for the ensemble. This game will reignite the community spirit among the students and refresh their brains on how to work creatively together.

Day Nine:

Objective: Devise

- Warm-up
- Devise (Large Group and Small Groups)
Begin by splitting the group into groups of characters that they want to have interact. Have them devise short scenes in these small groups before coming together again to devise another large group scene. An important thing to keep in mind is that devising does not need to happen in order. In fact, it usually is easier to not devise it in order.
- Practice/Present
Have the small groups present their short scenes to each other and practice the large group scene together.

Day Ten:

Objective: Devise

- Warm-up
- *Copycat*
This game is used as a reminder to students to pay attention to others in their scenes and when they are devising in the show. See Games Compendium for description.
- Review
- Devise
Continue in whatever way would best progress the show - small groups, large groups, or a combination.

Day Eleven:

Objective: Finish Devising

- Warm-up
- Review
- Finish Devising

Finish the entire show today! It does not need to be clean, just completed. Future classes will be used for polishing things up.

Day Twelve:

Objective: Line work

➤ Warm-up

➤ *Lines From the Floor*

This game is a fun way to practice listening and gift giving (skills that are always beneficial to practice) as well as a way of leading into the main activity of the day.

➤ Solidifying Lines

Now that the show is completely devised, have the students confirm what they are actually going to say (approximately). Work with them on taking notes about the play so that a script can be created and be as accurate as possible to what will actually be performed. Practice the show with the new consistent line choices.

Day Thirteen:

Objective: Design

➤ Warm-up

➤ Run Show

➤ Design Time

Have students design their costumes, props, and set pieces. Have them write descriptions along with their drawings for clarification and list anything that they do not already own and will need to be provided. End by discussing who will be in charge of bringing what for the actual show. If materials permit, this class can also be when props, costumes, and set pieces are created.

Day Fourteen

Objective: Finalize Show

➤ Warm-up

➤ Run Show

➤ Decide on Improv Games/Practice

Decide what games the students want to play for their performance. Decide who will play what games and what order they will be in. Practice the entire put together show.

Day Fifteen

Objective: Rehearse

➤ Rehearse Show (Including Improv Games)

➤ Student Surveys

Take this time to discuss with students what they have learned over the course of the class and fill out some surveys about their experiences.

Final Day: Performance!!!

Games Compendium:

- *Name Zap*

Stand in a circle. The leader will say a name and that person in the circle must duck while the two people next to them “zap” each other using a clapping motion. The last one to say zap is out, or if the person whose name was called forgot to duck they are out, or if a person zaps the wrong person they are out. Continue until there are only two left and then vegetable off.
- *Machine*

One person starts the machine by doing a single continuous sound and action. One by one people add on to the machine with their own singular continuous sound and action until all are part of the machine. Challenge students to create a machine that is actually doing something and to create a machine with varying levels. No two motions can be accomplishing the same task.
- *Orchestra*

Sitting in a circle, one person is the conductor and is in charge of establishing a steady beat. When the conductor says the name of someone else in the circle, they must add a single continuous noise or rhythm to the established beat. Continue until all are a part of the created song or soundscape. Conductor may then yell out to grow louder or softer or speed up or slow down or to remove certain sounds until they end the song by signaling everyone to cut off. Sounds to be made can be anything, musical or not. The goal is just to do something that fits into the established beat and what everyone else has added before you.
- *Create-a-Commercial*

Split students into even groups. Give each student a mundane object they must sell. The rules are that the groups have 5 minutes to create a commercial for their item that includes: The name of the object, the price of the object, how we can buy the object, and a jingle or tag line for the object. Everyone in the group must be a part of the commercial. Groups may be as creative with their object as they wish to make it more sellable - an example is a group that was given the object of a potted plant and their commercial ended up being for “The Self Sustaining Plant” that not only waters and takes care of itself, but will take care of you too.
- *Purse*

This is a game akin to packing my grandmother's bag. The song is rapped: “Purse, Purse, in my purse, I’m going to put it in my purse” to a simple lap - clap rhythm. Before beginning, choose a category such as fruit or movies. After the verse has been rapped, the song will continue around the circle with every person rapping “I’ve got {blank} in my purse,” adding something to the purse that fits in the established category. There can be no repeat items and whatever they say must stay in the rhythm of the song.
- *Mirror Exercise*

An acting classic, have actors in pairs facing each other. One person is the leader and the other is their mirror.

- *Gibberish Scenes*

Treat the scene just like any improv scene, getting a suggestion for the actors to go off of. The twist is that they can not use any discernible language to communicate - they can only speak in gibberish.

- *30 Second Fairy Tales*

Split into even groups. Each group will be secretly given a fairy tale (or a movie, or a book...) in which to act out. The catch is, there can be absolutely no sound. And they only have 30 seconds to perform it. AND everyone in the group must be involved in the scene. Obviously, no charades or mouthing of words is allowed as it is counterproductive for the activity. Have groups perform for each other and guess what stories the others were given. Each correct guess earns a point for the guessing team and for the performing team. This game is most fun when playing multiple rounds.

- *Here Comes the Waiter*

This game requires three improvisers. Two will be sitting at a restaurant, reminiscing about the last time they were there and the wacky waiter that they had. One improviser will say a weird way that the waiter walked, while the other will provide a strange way that the waiter talked. The third improviser will then enter as the described weird waiter walking and talking in the way the other improvisers articulated. The scene then continues with the waiter taking the other improvisers orders - and whatever else may end up happening. This game can be adapted to be more complicated or simpler depending on the ability levels of the students.

- *Party Quirks*

There is one improviser who is the party host who sets up the scene. Their job is to guess quirks that the other improvisers in the scene have been given by the audience. Improvisers enter one at a time, but they do not leave the party until their quirk has been correctly guessed. They may interact with each other and the host to help establish what their quirk is. An example of a quirk: spaghetti for hair, or hiccuping every step. The game ends when all quirks have been guessed and the host is once again alone on stage.

- *Frogger*

Students sit in a circle, all of them flies, except one who is secretly a frog (that the instructor chooses by having everyone close their eyes and tapping the frog/frogger on the shoulder). The frogger may kill flies by making eye contact and sticking their tongue out at them. If this happens, the flie must die dramatically. To make it clear for the flies, only the frogger may stick their tongue out. The catch is that there is a detective standing in the middle of the circle trying to guess who the frogger is by catching them sticking out their tongue. They have three guesses to save the town from this frog. Every wrong guess kills the innocent fly being accused.

- *Story Pitching*

In this exercise students are paired up and sit across from each other. Each has one minute of uninterrupted time for them to pitch their ideas. The other one must be actively listening to what the other says and write down key ideas on a sticky note.

- *Assassins*

This game is essentially the same basic concept as frogger. The differences: You are at a dinner party, milling about the room. You must shake hands with everyone you meet. You are “poisoned” by the assassin by them tapping your wrist when you shake their hand. The poison takes time to take effect, and you must shake several other people’s hands before you dramatically die. Anyone can make a guess as to who the assassin is, but if they guess incorrectly they die of shame. The game continues until there are only a couple people left and it becomes obvious who the assassin is unless the assassin is guessed correctly sooner. With large groups of people, there can be multiple assassins. Additionally, the assassin does not need to poison every person whom they shake hands with.

- *Three Headed Expert*

This game takes four improvisers. One is the interviewer, the other three are the person being interviewed. Each person can only say one word, going down the line in the same order all the time. The audience gives a suggestion as to what the three headed person could be an expert on and then the interview begins their interview. It can be a tv show interview, radio interview, instagram live, etc. The interviewer ends the scene themselves when they feel it is time after asking the expert various questions.

- *One Sentence Stories*

Going around the circle, each person gets to add one sentence to a story. For this class's purposes, I assigned each person a certain story element their sentence had to cover. For example, the first two people were to use their sentences as exposition. The third person’s sentence would be the inciting incident. The next five would be rising action, and the sixth would be the climax. One more sentence for falling action, and one sentence for a conclusion. Continue starting with different people so that students have the opportunity to provide different parts of the story.

- *Story Story Die*

This game requires a leader. Get a suggestion from the audience, and then explain that the improvisers will be telling them a story - but if the improviser where to stumble, hesitate, or say something that doesn’t make sense the audience must yell DIE and then the improviser will die a dramatic death and be out for the remainder of the story. The catch? The improvisers may only speak when you, the leader, touches their head.

- *30 Second Relationships*

Have students stand in two lines facing each other. They will have only 30 second to establish some kind of relationship with the person across from them using only their body language. After 30 seconds, one line will move one person down and the 30 seconds will restart with the new pairings.

- *Character Interviews*

In this exercise, students will be paired up and then given several minutes by themselves to think of questions to ask their partner, who will be in character. They will then take turns interviewing each other for the rest of the class, creating essentially two scenes.

- *Ensemble Obstacles*

This game is a combination of red light green light and capture the flag with its own twist. Like in red light green light, one person will be at one end of the room with their back turned to the rest of the group on the other side. The group can only move when the person is not looking, with their goal being to reach them. If the person with their back turned catches anyone moving, they are sent back to the beginning. To make things more collaborative, there is an object half way that needs to be brought up to the person with their back turned without them seeing. The catch is everyone in the group must touch the object before it can be brought to the person with their back turned. If more difficulty is needed, the rule can be added that if the person with their back turned can tell who has the object that person must go back to the beginning. Every time someone is sent back to the beginning, the object is reset and everyone must touch it again before it can be brought to the person with their back turned.

- *Copycat*

In this game students will be paired up and take turns being the leader. The leader must walk around as their character while their partner shadows them, observing how they move and copying them until they are a perfect copycat of their character. They can then walk freely and interact with others - including the person they are copying.

- *Lines from the Floor*

In this improv game, lines are written on pieces of paper and scattered over the floor. The scene starts normally with a suggestion being given to the audience, but whenever an improviser gets stuck or when the scene needs something new added to it an improviser will pick up a line from the floor and incorporate it immediately into the scene. The lines may be as ridiculous or basic as you wish, an example may be “The seagulls! They are attacking!” or something as simple as “I have a bad feeling about this.”