
Improv Exercises

Improv exercises can be used to encourage spontaneity, co-creation and 'thinking on your feet'. They originate in improvised theatre, where a performance is created on the spot without a predefined script. Outside the performing arts improv can be used, for example, in team-building, development of communication skills, or therapy. In futureing processes improv can be helpful as an ice-breaker, a way to train the 'speculative mind', to help visualise a scenario, an exercise in collaborative storytelling or world-building. Improv can help during phases where a process becomes overly analytical, or bogged down in rigid, overzealous worldviews. Improv can shake up the status quo and take people out of their comfort zones in a playful and usually harmless manner.

There are thousands of improv exercises possible, which can be applied in almost any setting. We will present a select few of the techniques that we use most frequently, and have found most productive in FoAM's workshops, with links to other improv resources. 'The Box' is an example of (status) transactions, 'Tableau Vivant' an example of setting the scene and collective spontaneity, and 'A word at a time' is an example of an improvised storytelling exercise.

See also [improvisation](#) as an aptitude.

The Box An exercise for becoming aware of participants' streams of (un)consciousness and observing what emerges. The exercise involves the exchange of (imaginary) boxes in which there are gifts. The box contains something that the receiver has always wanted. The goal of the exercise is to find out, on the spot, what might be in the boxes. At the end of the exercise the group will end up with an (often surprising) collection of 'gifts'. The exercise can stop here, or the 'gifts' could be used as a basis of a speculative/visioning/storytelling experiment.

Process

- Step 1: Explain the improvisation: 'I will give each of you a box. In the box is a gift, a gift you always wanted to receive. Enjoy the gift for a few moments, then start walking, changing directions when you feel like it. Keep the box for a while, then swap the box with someone else. Let go of its contents and focus on the process of giving a gift to someone. The receiver accepts the box and again receives the perfect gift (the contents of the box change through the process of 'giving'). Keep passing the boxes around, giving and receiving. Please do so in silence. Any questions?'
- Step 2: When any questions have been answered, ask the participants to stand in a circle and experience the sensations of standing still and noticing what thoughts and feelings emerge in their minds.

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- Step 3: One by one, give the participants a 'box' by holding a box-like space in between your hands (different sizes for different people).
 - Step 4: Observe what happens and support the participants if you see they are blocked or uncomfortable (give them another box, suggests they lift it above their heads to feel the weight, shake it, put their hands in it...)
 - Step 5: After a few minutes, approach one participant from the group and ask them to open the box and describe what is in it. Encourage spontaneous answers. Find out what is in the box without thinking too much. e.g. 'Can you open the box please? What's in the box? Put your hand in a bit deeper... is there anything else in the box? How about if you shake it? Did anything come loose? And if you smell it?' The facilitator notes down the contents of the box, thanks the participant and invites him/her to sit on the perimeter and observe the others. One by one all the participants should have a chance to discover what is in their boxes.
 - Step 6: Once everyone has spoken and is sitting down, the exercise is over. Read out the list of gifts from everyone's boxes and reflect on the exercise.

Tableau vivant A Tableau Vivant or a 'living picture' is a still image with live actors. In improv, the participants portray a situation by standing still in a particular posture, with or without props. The benefit of a tableau vivant is that a complex story can be distilled and visualised like a photograph. It can be used as a warming-up exercise, or as part of [incasting](#).

Process

- Step 1: Either you provide a situation to be portrayed, or invite the participants to choose one themselves (for example from a set of scenarios they developed as part of their futuring process).
- Step 2: Invite participants to discuss the situation and design a still image that captures its essence. If appropriate they can design a 'caption' or 'title' for their image.
- Step 3: Rehearse the tableau vivant and if needed make adjustments.
- Step 4: Perform the tableau vivant in front of an 'audience' (with or without a spoken or written caption). Take a photograph.
- Step 5: Invite the members of the audience to interpret the image.
- Step 6: After they come out of their tableau, allow the 'actors' to explain and comment on the interpretations.

A word at a time This exercise, based on the surrealist game *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse), helps the participants to warm up to collective storytelling and allows creative inhibitions to drop.

Process Step 1: Explain the process: 'This is a storytelling exercise where each person offers one word to the person next to them, who then gives another word to the next person and so on. The aim is to build sentences and a story together, one word at a time. Don't worry about saying something clever or stupid, just say the first thing that comes to mind and watch the unexpected narrative develop.'

Step 2: Begin with a word and 'offer' it to the person next to you (by turning your head or making a gesture of giving). Try an inclusive word like 'we' or 'our' to make the story inclusive of everyone present.

Step 3: Let the story develop for a few rounds and feel when it is time to stop. The participants might stop by themselves, or if you find the story is nearing its end, draw it to a conclusion yourself.

Step 4: Reflect on the experience.

References

- [Keith Johnstone](#): Impro. Improvisation and the Theatre and [Impro for storytellers](#)
- [Improv Encyclopedia](#)
- [ImproWiki](#)
- [Imprology](#)
- [Theatre of the oppressed](#)