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APPLIED IMPROVISATION MAGAZINE



ROBERT POYNTON

Everything's Still an Offer

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

Making Friends with Chaos

BRIGHT SU

Improvisation is Zen in Western Context

HUMAN
INTELLIGENT
GENERATIVE
HOPEFUL

AIM HIGH

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MAGAZINE GUIDE

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In article paragraphs, if you see **text in bold & colour**, or this  symbol, it could be a link to a website or email.

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE APPLIED IMPROVISATION NETWORK

I am excited to meet you here, in our very first issue of the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM). The AIM – as a membership product – serves Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) members. As a professional magazine, it represents AIN’s collective work. As a flagship from AIN, it promotes Applied Improvisation in broad sectors and disciplines. My warm welcome to you!

As 2023 begins, I reflect on recent years’ successes. AIN has reinvested in the organization, primarily around how we position ourselves as the leaders in Applied Improvisation.

An in-person Annual World Conference has been our flagship since AIN’s founding in 2002. Then came 2020 and a global pandemic! Our virtual conference was born, and I am happy to announce that AIN has held two Virtual Conferences two years in a row. Plus, online Open Space has been running weekly ever since.

In 2021, AIN invested in an entirely new website www.appliedimprovisationnetwork.org to help us better serve and engage with our membership. And I am proud that we now have 500 paid members in 32 countries, and our professional membership is increasing each month. Our Facebook AIN group is 8,400 members strong. This growing

member engagement amplifies our profession beyond our previous reach. If you are not a member, **consider the benefits and join.**

There’s not a day where I don’t hear “applied improvisation” and the impact of its application. We are no longer some kind of best-kept secret.

You are witnessing another flagship – AIM – being born! In this first issue, the magazine team showcases their writing, artwork, and design talents. I encourage you to share the content with your colleagues and friends. Also, consider ordering **print-on-demand copies from www.magcloud.com/user/appliedimprovisationmagazine** and sharing them with clients.

Happy New Year! Welcome to the AIN Family.



ED REGGI
AIN BOARD PRESIDENT

Ed Reggi is a lifelong storyteller. He's originally from New York City and moved to Chicago's The Second City, which led him to work with Paul Sills for over a decade. Today he's faculty at Lindenwood University and the Center of Creative Arts (COCA) in St. Louis, Missouri. Reggi joined the AIN Board in 2018 and started serving as the President in 2021. edreggi@gmail.com

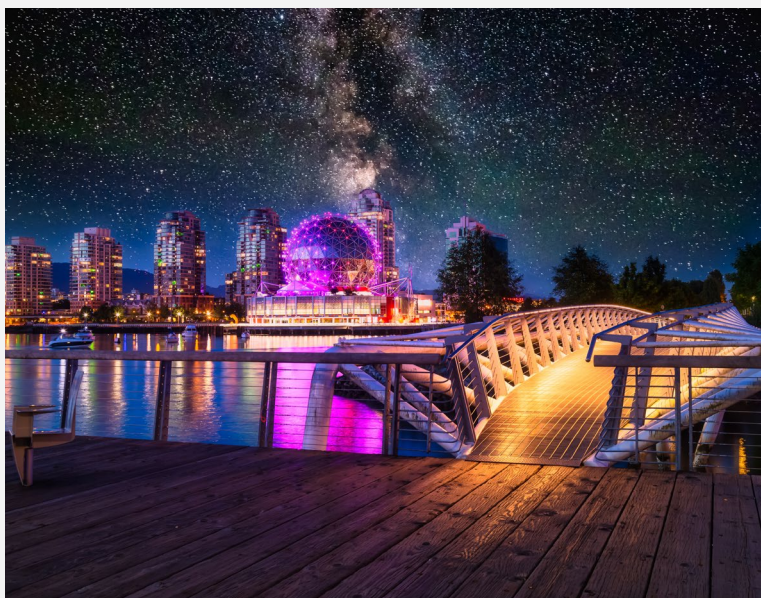
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SAVE THE DATES

Thursday, July 27, 2023 to Sunday, July 30, 2023

2023 AIN World Conference

(in person) at Vancouver, Canada



WE ALSO WANT TO AIM HIGH. HUMAN, INTELLIGENT, GENERATIVE, HOPEFUL.

HUMAN.

As robots and another favourite AI (Artificial Intelligence) whisk us towards the Singularity (or not), perhaps we'll discover that the principles and practices of improvisation are what remain to us as distinctively human. We're talking creativity and collaboration; feelings and embodiment.

INTELLIGENT.

Improvisers, like other professionals, sometimes say silly things. Here we want to articulate and examine the concepts of improvisation as they are tested in real-world applications, beyond say the safe space of theatrical rehearsal studios. How well do our familiar tenets stand up to the scrutiny of business, political and humanitarian environments?

GENERATIVE.

Let's share ideas, case studies, news. Let's inspire each other into fresh intellectual and practical enterprises.

HOPEFUL.

And let's make those new enterprises inspiring, positive, inclusive and thoughtful.

As a reader, you are invited to 'Yes, And...' what you find here. Accept this as a starting point and Build it better by offering your support, whether that's an article for a future issue, a good question for one of the contributors or passing this along to others who may be interested.

WHY WE'RE AIMING HIGH

So here it is. Welcome to the very first issue of the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM).

What's the aim of the AIM? We want to articulate, research and promote what is going on in the emergent and growing field of Applied Improvisation. The magazine is written primarily by and for members of the Applied Improvisation

Network (the AIN), so we are leaning towards academic rigour and also to spreading the word to potential collaborators, clients and related professionals.

In practice, that means providing a forum for bright, accessible writing about all the many applications of improvisation.

WHAT'S IN THIS ISSUE

Read Belina Raffy's case study of her work with the Inga Foundation in Honduras. Many of us knew we needed coffee to improvise well. Here we learn how coffee growers also need improvisation.

Our What's Hot section has Terje Brevik's report from the recent AIN conference in Avila, Spain, plus the editor's account of a seminal session there on the future of Applied Improvisation – We will be calling it Improvisation.

Spain conference chair Carla Vigara is profiled by Ilene Bergelson in this issue's AI Through My Eyes interview.

We have a giveaway! Yes, Robert Poynton reflects on writing his book, Everything's An Offer, which you can then download in full for free.

If you want to make friends with chaos – and frankly it's a pretty good choice – check out Patricia Ryan Madson's piece. Then Lisa Yeager reveals why A Scientist, a Project Manager and an Improviser Walk into a Zoo.

Ever faced your Inner Critic? Alex Leviton explores the improvisational riposte. Reporting from his classroom, Doug Shaw delves into the connections between Mathematics, Teaching, and Improvisation.

Continuing this more academic strand, Vicki Crooks introduces the AI in Education section, featuring

Dramas of Persuasion, an incisive reflection by Sally Harrison-Pepper.

Keen to research further and read more widely? You'll enjoy the valuable resource lists offered by Kay Ross, who explains her methods and processes. And Lukas Zenk reveals the main findings of his latest research project.

We'll be reviewing books about Applied Improvisation in our Bookshelf section. Is it all in the mindset – or do we need bodies too?

Three applied improvisers agreed to profile each other in turn: they are In The Spotlight. And one of them, Bright Su, also provides a touching memoir of his grandmother and her embodied connection to improvisation.

Let's get reading!




PAUL Z JACKSON
EDITOR

Co-founder of AIN, Paul is an organisational consultant, facilitator and trainer, based in Oxford, UK. Here he returns to his first profession as a journalist, to help launch this magazine. paul@impro.org.uk.



WHERE



AI Everywhere was born of curiosity. This section explores how Applied Improvisation is used in different domains, by different people, all over the globe. Whether it is a story about growing coffee in a more sustainable way, exploring how math can be improved by an AI approach or how people can have better climate conversations, we address questions about how to learn from the wide range of applications. We wondered whether we could find AI everywhere, and our initial answer is a resounding “Yes, And...”



Viva La Revolución!

FROM LEFT: BELINA RAFFY, CHARO LANAO AND AIDA GUERREIRO BRITO



PHOTO COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

Words by
BELINA RAFFY

If we implement nature-based solutions, we need to improvise, as this case study (with coffee) reveals.

I am based in Berlin, where the public transportation is plentiful and regular, the tap water is safe to drink, and my most frequent encounter with local wildlife is while trying to feed hazelnuts to adorable and timid red squirrels.

The first time I went to Honduras was in December 2021. While there, I got hissed at by a giant boa constrictor I couldn't see (it was dark), bitten by numerous bugs (I am apparently delicious), and managed to pick up both influenza A and a parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica*.

The second time was in May 2022. I was only there for a week, and I managed to pick up the gut bacteria *Helicobacter pylori* which, if left untreated, could cause stomach ulcers and cancer. (My doctors and I treated it and I am now fine.)

I am about to go to Honduras for the third time in under a year. This time for six weeks. And I can't wait. What makes it worth it to me to visit this adventurous, wildly beautiful, transitioning narco-state with dangerous life forms big and small?

It's a chance for me to use and teach improvisation as a powerful technology to support a nascent nature-based revolution in the coffee industry. This work has the potential to transform land use and the well-being of smallholder coffee farmers' lives. These goals are especially attractive at a time when war by Russia is making traditional pesticides and fertilisers prohibitively expensive in Honduras, back-to-back climate crises are causing crop failure, and diminishing crop returns by exhausted soils are making many Central American smallholder farmers lose hope and join the precarious caravanas to seek a better life.

“ I fell in love with an amazing, rigorously scientifically-proven, and breathtakingly holistic nature-based agroforestry approach...”

The backstory

In July 2012, I went to the Frontline Club in London and watched a documentary called 'Up in Smoke' (not the Cheech and Chong film). Through that film, I fell in love with

an amazing, rigorously scientifically proven, and breathtakingly holistic nature-based agroforestry approach by the Inga Foundation, which gives farmers in the humid tropics a vibrant and truly regenerative alternative to 'slash and burn' farming. I kept in touch with them and was planning to visit their demonstration farm in Le Ceiba, Honduras in December 2021. Ten years on from the initial documentary film, their system was being replicated in 15 countries in the humid tropics. In Honduras, the Inga Foundation had 420 families who had embraced the system, with none returning to slash-and-burn practices. Those families were also responsible for planting over four million trees. And a community whose slash-and-burn farming had split a national park were now looking to rejoin the two sides of the park by embracing the Inga Foundation agroforestry system. On the fields that had been running the system for a while, long-gone freshwater springs were returning. In terms of SDGs, the Inga Foundation approach was positively addressing 11 of the 17 goals, with no negative impact on the other six.

In July 2021, I was approached by two fabulous ladies I knew, both working with an organisation called

‘Bring on the Zoo’ (BOTZ). For years, BOTZ had worked with Tchibo, a big German company, to help improve human rights conditions in supplier factories around the world.

As we all know, 2020 and 2021 were particularly difficult times with the global pandemic. To bring much-needed new energy and insights to their human rights facilitators around the world, the BOTZ ladies created a series of online workshops as part of their beautifully-titled, ‘Summer of Love and Art,’ and they asked me to run a workshop for them. I ran one in line with my book, *Using Improv to Save the World (and me)*. We focused on activities which create joyful connection, encourage listening and presence, and help us practice co-creation. They loved it.

“ We focused on activities which create joyful connection, encourage listening and presence, and help us practice co-creation...”

In October 2021, the BOTZ ladies asked me to design and deliver a three-day online conference for the same group of trainers on working with power. For this, I decided to weave together three threads: improvisation, solutions focus, and an adaptation of a Quaker ‘clearness committee’ process. The experience was truly transformational and showed the power of what we can do to support each other through times of major change if we have the right processes, culture and approach.

One attendee in October, Tchibo’s Aida Guerreiro Brito, had been instrumental in advancing the human rights work with the BOTZ ladies. She’d recently moved to the coffee section of Tchibo, where she was looking to transform both environmental sustainability and the quality of life of their smallholder coffee farmers.

I mentioned to Aida that I was going to be in Honduras in December, visiting the Inga Foundation, and she, the Inga Foundation, and I devised an experiment based on two questions. “What happens if we spend three days introducing key managers and agronomists within the Honduran coffee company Becamo (supplying Tchibo), to these collaborative, creative mindsets of improvisation, while they explore the Inga Foundation’s nature-based approach? How might the approach support the transformation of the environmental impact and the livelihoods of their coffee farmers?”.

Three confessions

First, I don’t speak Spanish. (The company found me an awesome interpreter named Katia.)

Second, I had never worked with the Inga Foundation team before. (They were generously big-hearted and when we first met in person, we had a blue morpho butterfly dancing around our heads, which I took as a good omen.)

Third, Inga Foundation had never worked this way with a company before. (They were nervous about how potentially closed-minded

the agronomists from Becamo would be, as Inga Foundation is revolutionary in terms of traditional agriculture practices.)

Despite all that, the experiment in December 2021 paid off, and we realised something important. Not only were the participants from the coffee company excited to learn more about this nature-based solution, but they also noticed that the quality of conversations they had experienced, in large part created by the workshop design and culture of improvisation and engagement, was totally different from what happens when they run a typical training with their coffee farmers on new agricultural methods. Their traditional approach to training was relatively didactic and rigid.

I learned that a key to Inga Foundation’s success at testing and adapting the implementation of this nature-based solution to over 420 families in Honduras was that the Inga team instinctively improvises - with each other, changing conditions and farmer wisdom. And they are very good at it - doing it with great care, integrity and compassion. If another company were to adopt and adapt their nature-based and people-based solutions, their trainers - in this case the coffee agronomists in Becamo - would have to improvise too, with their own coffee farmers.

So that was what happened in May 2022. I joined a wise, Ireland-based Peruvian facilitator named Charo Lanao to design and run a three-day Training of Trainers (ToT) for 15 Latinx agronomists (14 males and 1 female).



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

TOP LEFT: CHARO LANAO, BELINA RAFFY AND KATIA TORRES

BOTTOM LEFT: ABRAHAM MARTINEZ, DIRECTOR OF FIELD OPERATIONS FOR INGA FOUNDATION, WITH ORGANIC COCOA FROM THE DEMONSTRATION FARM

TOP RIGHT: ON THE INGA FOUNDATION DEMONSTRATION FARM WITH THE COFFEE AGRONOMISTS

BOTTOM RIGHT, FROM LEFT: KELVIN BODDEN, ORNITHOLOGIST, AND THE INGA TEAM (LUIS MIRANDA, WILMER NUNIEZ, ELVIN MARTINEZ, ABRAHAM MARTINEZ AND MICHAEL HANDS) Elvin Martinez was killed two weeks after this picture was taken and his loss is still being felt and mourned by the Inga Foundation Team

On my way there, my comedy brain proposed a daunting thought. We were coming to Honduras to get some male Latinx agronomists (and one female) to sit in a circle, play games, and talk about their feelings. From the outside, I would have thought I was nuts.

But what happened blew us all away. The agronomists and their managers learned, adapted, and then owned the improvisational and facilitative methods.

On the first day, Charo and I introduced key concepts, including Charo's powerful invitation that a trainer also needs to be a facilitator and a learner. To support that ability to shift roles, we engaged the agronomists in some key improvisation activities, including a game in which we practiced discovering and acknowledging the value in each others ideas, and another game where we practiced holding space for each other to receive and spontaneously define delightful gifts from an imaginary box. A key skill in this latter game is that the holder of the imaginary box becomes a facilitator - they do not dictate what is in the box for the gift receiver, but suggests categories that the gift could belong to, and only if the gift receiver gets stuck in their gift brainstorm.

On the second day, we focused on practices that helped us to identify and engage with different

perspectives, and we experienced approaches that nurtured our own curiosity and helped us to hold our own assumptions lightly. In the afternoon, as an extension of this practice, the agronomists prepared mini-workshops on a typical (for them) training topic. I attended one on pest control. The task was for the groups to cover the topic, but design and deliver it in a way that honoured being a trainer, facilitator, and learner. Traditionally, these topics would have been delivered only from the trainer perspective. The agronomists felt the difference - both as a person leading the mini-workshop, and as a role-play farmer. The engagement was very high and they could feel instantly how much more alive and useful the conversations were.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BELINA RAFFY

FROM LEFT: ANNALENA VON RHEIN, NOEMI CABALLERO, AIDA GUERREIRO BRITO

“ What the agronomists did was powerful - they created refined mini-workshops designed to help everyone remember what their learning had been...”

On the third day, the founder and president of the company arrived by helicopter to see how the training was going. We did not know this was going to happen until the second day, and we were worried about the impact on participants of having the big boss come. What the agronomists did was powerful - they created refined mini-workshops designed to help everyone remember what their learning had been in our



ToT, by using and adapting the tools we had given them. As part of that, they re-introduced the gift box activity as it had been done, and then as a way for each participant to share a gift idea from our three days together.

Throughout the workshop, we gave the agronomists time to reflect and co-create their own ideal learning toolkit for what we were covering, so that they had something perfectly adapted to their own needs. After our ToT, they quickly refined this material into a living document with quotes, photos, and notes on the different models and activities that they wanted to remember.

In the follow-up meeting a month and a half later, their creative use of improvisation gave us all chill bumps. Now all meetings with farmers are in high-engagement circles.

The agronomists were improvising on the spot, holding their assumptions lightly, and creating processes to make it easy for farmers to raise their needs. The agronomists were even using methods like acknowledging the value in each others' ideas with their wives and children. (I think our three days in May made a lot of wives happier.)

Just after our time together in May, two of our participants headed into a training meeting with coffee farmers, and there were three times as many farmers as they expected.

They immediately invited people to form groups based on interest so that the design could be tailored to what people wanted to cover on the day. Something they had never done before our 3-day training.

Since then, Tchibo, Becamo and Inga Foundation have signed a contract. Now equipped with improvisation, the Becamo agronomists and some of their coffee farmers will be embedded for two weeks at a time with the Inga Foundation farms, so they can learn all of the practical and social approaches needed to make this nature-based, improvisation-supported revolution in coffee work.

Viva la revolución!



BELINA RAFFY

Belina helps people who work on environmental and social issues to collaborate more effectively, creatively, and lovingly with nature and each other. She is the collaboration coach for the science accelerator lab Frontier Development Lab. She created the global, compassionate, stand-up comedy course, *Sustainable Stand Up*. Belina giggles a lot because she loves what she does.

www.maffick.com

www.sustainablestandup.com

www.frontierdevelopmentlab.org

www.fdlleurope.org





SHELF

Books are more patient than most people. They understand us and bind us together as authors, readers and reviewers. They break the shackles of locale and time.

In this issue, we have author Robert Poynton reflecting on writing his own book, while Paul Z Jackson reviews *The Applied Improvisation Mindset*.



Everything's Still An Offer

Words by

ROBERT POYNTON

I wrote *Everything's An Offer* for one person - me. I wrote to make sense of what I was learning, to try to get my arms around how the ideas and practices embodied by improvisers on stage connect with the messy, everyday realities of ordinary life and work. Writing is hard and that is what makes it a powerful discipline. It forced me to clarify my thinking and give my ideas a solid grounding.

“I am finding things, not creating them; as if I were wandering along a beach...”

In a context like Oxford University, where I began to work in 2002, that helped. I knew that having a book would give me at least a fig leaf of respectability, even if no-one ever read it. What I didn't anticipate was how the writing process would show up in me. Had I burned the manuscript before anyone saw it, it would still have been worthwhile, because the writing enabled me to speak with a different kind of authority and confidence about something which, at the time, seemed ridiculous to many.

It took a while - I was working on *Everything's an Offer* from 2002 to 2008, though much of what I was doing in the first couple of years I would now call research rather than writing.

Energy and interests

This was partly because I had a young family and a nascent business, but also because I had no idea what I was doing. So I started by starting and learned by doing.

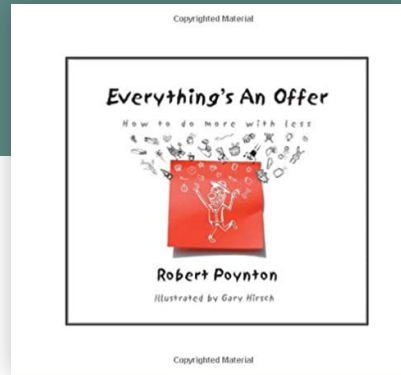
I wrote it out of order, following my energy and interests, rather than a plan. I let the structure emerge from the writing, rather than writing

to fill in a structure. The process was punctuated by moments of inspiration that I couldn't possibly have anticipated. For example, I vividly remember, one stoking hot summer afternoon in Avila, Spain, when I found the first sentence, and with it the elusive voice on which so much hinges. That was like understanding 'the game within the game' and unlocked things in a magical way.

I say 'found' because that is how writing feels to me - I am finding things, not creating them; as if I were wandering along a beach picking up and discarding words like pebbles, until I find the ones I like.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT POYNTON



Get your free copy of
Everything's An Offer

DOWNLOAD

It is personal

It is a very personal book. One agent described it as “long-winded and talky” and I can see why she thought so. But plenty of people like that. Those who know me say it is like having a conversation and prefer it to the more pared-down book, *Do Improve*.

“A book is an extension of yourself..”

A book is an extension of yourself, like a search algorithm or radioactive marker, that takes your ideas out into the world and makes connections with other people and ideas. *Everything's an Offer* brought me some of my closest friends.

Once written, books stay written, so they can have a long life, which, like any life, can be full of surprises. When it came out a number of people told me how it helped them through a bout of mental illness, something I neither imagined nor intended. And recently I discovered that the chapter on status is being used as a set text in a business school where I have never worked, by someone I have never met.

Looking back at the text now, it is amazing to me how much is in it. It is packed with ideas and images – from ‘control addiction’ to a discussion of embodied and tacit knowledge - many of which I had forgotten about. Some of it feels prescient. The model has stood the test of time (and two editions of *Do Improve*), though now I draw it as a Venn diagram, not a triangle.

I am not sure if this is depressing or inspiring. On the one hand it reminds me there are deep, robust patterns at work, which I have been interested in and working with for over twenty years and will probably continue to be fascinated with until I die. Which is reassuring. But in my more vulnerable moments it makes me feel like I haven't learned anything at all.

An invitation to explore

I invite you to read it in the same spirit that I wrote it. As an exploration. Start in the middle, or at the end. Dip into it. Open on a random page. Scan the contents page to find a theme or piece of practice you are curious about or working with. Use the index (or the search function on a pdf) to look up

what I have to say about Margaret Atwood, the relaxation response, *Toy Story* or anything else that takes your fancy.

I am going to do something similar: in future editions of this magazine I will pick out a passage and comment on it from my current perspective. We can take the title literally and use anything and everything within it as an offer, and see where that takes us.



ROBERT POYNTON

Rob's work is a lifelong improvisation. He left London to work in Madrid, only to move to Argentina. A chance meeting with Gary Hirsch led to an improvisation-based business (On Your Feet) that thrives today. Another unplanned twist led to Oxford University's Saïd Business School (where he is an Associate Fellow). He has worked with companies such as PwC, the BBC and Merck. He has taught at Schumacher College and Singularity University.

Rob is the author of *Everything's An Offer*, *Do Improve* and *Do Pause*.

www.yellowlearning.org
www.theeverydayimproviser.com
www.robertpoynton.com

Making Friends With Chaos

Words by
PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

“You can count on chaos,” I intone as we start a round of messy, loud games that involve throwing imaginary sound balls. No one likes the feeling of all this noise and disorder. A common response (especially from engineers ;-)) is to ‘fix’ this untidy situation by invoking rules or controls that slow down the mess and work to turn the chaos into some kind of manageable order. This is human nature. Why not control what we can? That’s what humans do. That’s civilization.

“Precisely what improvisation teaches: how to live vibrantly in a field of flux, an office of uncertainty, even an apartment of landmines...”

There is another response to chaos. Live with it. Accept its unstable condition. Work inside of the teetering mass. Embrace the wobble.

Remember when you were trying to learn to ride a bicycle? My first response was to “screw on the training wheels,” so that I could make the thing stable. We all know that this is simply a quick fix and does not address the real issue: learning how to go with the delicate balance of the two-wheeler. And, think about it: when we’ve mastered the two-wheel bike and we zoom

along seemingly ‘in control’, the reality is that the wobble - that instability - is still there. We are simply riding it using a new awareness of what it means to be always balancing. The body sense of being poised is in constant play.

To study improvisation is to study the ‘kinhin’ (the body knowledge) of living inside an unknown and unknowable future, gliding along, using the resources at hand to do something useful or artful. Pema Chödrön said it well in advising her readers: instead of trying to get away from the discomfort of the unknown we should develop an aptitude for what she calls “positive groundlessness, or positive insecurity.” There is wisdom in insecurity.

“We need to develop an appetite for groundlessness; we need to get curious about it and be willing to pause and hang out for a while in that space of insecurity,” she said. Pema Chödrön titled her book *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*. This seemingly-abstract dictum is precisely what improvisation teaches: how to live vibrantly in a field of flux, an office of uncertainty, even an apartment of landmines. We cannot let this not-knowing paralyze us. We need to stay in motion, in constructive action during this groundlessness.

We do not know or need to know what comes next. We create it. And we have a choice in how we enter this present. Much has been written about mindfulness, or waking up to the “present moment.” Dr. David K.



Reynolds once quipped, “What other moment is there?”

I’m a great believer in making friends with uncertainty, becoming familiar with groundlessness, and coming to have a deep acquaintance

with the fluctuating pulse of everyday life. Sounds good. What does this really mean?

In checking a dictionary of synonyms, I find a full page, more



than 500 words that are synonymous with uncertainty. It's likely this not-knowing, the notion of risk, of mutability is precisely where we find ourselves all the time. The charitable void of the unknown is the field in which improvisation lives.

Getting to accept that life is uncertain is an easy sell. The hard part is to get us to study a way of abiding with chaos. Instead of interfering, we develop those muscles that accommodate the flow. Enter improvisation training, improvisation philosophy. Acceptance.

We need to do more than give lip service to Pema Chödrön's dictum to hang with groundlessness. We need tools and strongholds during the assault. Improvisation offers this ordinary advice: Breathe, pay attention, stay positive, shift your focus from yourself to what's happening out there, and then follow your first impulse to add something constructive. What could be simpler? Not!

Lisa Rowland, who teaches improvisation at Stanford University, said it this way: "I think the improvisors' art is the art of responding. The grand misconception is that improvisors are quick thinkers, and that our training goes to becoming quicker and more agile. It's true in a way, but really the skill that improvisors cultivate is the skill of responding/reacting: taking what is there and using it generatively. And sometimes the offers we pick aren't even intended as offers. Armed only with the basic assumption that whatever comes

our way is worth engaging, worth playing with, we are able to spin any input into something alive and joyful and unexpected. Part of that skill is paying attention, so that we notice what's coming at us. Another part is letting go of what we wish that offers were or what we thought they would be. The third part is raising the offer up, elevating it, so it might be transformed, bit by bit, into something delicious. Or at least something new."

(Facebook, May 10, 2015)

Those of us fortunate enough to be involved in the teaching and coaching of improvisation have a valuable gift for the world. We can cope with the chaos of today using these tools of improvisation.



PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

Patricia Ryan Madson is the author of *IMPROV WISDOM: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. Patricia is Emerita from Stanford, where she served as the head of the undergraduate acting program. In 1998 she was the winner of the Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for Outstanding Innovation in Undergraduate Education at Stanford. www.improvwisdom.com

AI IN EDUCATION



Teachers of Flexibility

An Introduction and an Invitation

Words by

VICKI CROOKS

Welcome to this section, designed to provide insights, examples, and dialogue related to the research, teaching, and practice of Applied Improvisation in Education. We

envision this as a forum for sharing how Applied Improvisation is being used in K-12,

colleges, universities, and professional schools.

“We want to invite you to submit your stories, article ideas, and questions...”

Coming from a range of backgrounds, situations, and disciplines, academics around the globe are not only using Applied Improvisation in classrooms, but they are also conducting research, writing, presenting, and collaborating to ensure that the practice and principles of Applied Improvisation continue to gain credence at our schools and institutions.

We want to celebrate and support that work by providing this forum. We are interested in highlighting the ways teachers and practitioners representing diverse academic backgrounds approach and promote this work. We will feature

summaries of academic articles, include insights from individuals who design and teach courses that include Applied Improvisation, and share case studies and stories about our experiences. Hopefully, this will also become a place for exchanging activities, asking questions, and inviting collaboration.

As teachers, researchers, and improvisers, we can make the most of this resource, using it to exchange ideas and strategies, to become informed by cross-disciplinary influences, and to gain fresh insights for our own work. Perhaps more importantly, if sharing our experiences and our research can equip us to improve current approaches to education, our time will be well spent.

As editors for this Applied Improvisation in Education section, we want to invite you to submit your stories, article ideas, and questions. We are college professors from different disciplines, and we teach in different universities. Nancy is a professor of behavioral science at a university in Missouri. I, Vicki, teach relational and organizational communication at a polytechnic university in Oregon. I have also taught at the K-12 level. We want to invite those of you doing important work in any educational context to reach out to us.

In a report sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, David J. Skorton, Chair of the Committee on Integrating Higher Education in the Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, suggests that our current narrow educational focus has left students without the necessary learning outcomes of critical thinking, communication, teamwork, and other “human skills” that are essential even, or especially, in high-tech fields (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). What Skorton is describing is the need to develop flexible thinkers who have had an integrative educational experience.

Applied Improvisation can help. Equipping students to become flexible thinkers involves implementing more holistic and flexible learning processes (Rayner & Cools, 2012). The earlier that training in creativity and flexible thinking starts, the better. AI does just that, helping students develop habits of creativity and learning flexibility with activities that involve experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and applying.

We, as applied improvisers within the field of education, have something important to contribute. In fact, we could lead these efforts to reform and reshape education. Learning from each other is a great way to start. We invite your participation and look forward to what is possible together.



RESOURCE

Information becomes knowledge when it interconnects. In this section we provide a guide to resources. A collection can become more than an enumeration.



“Thanks so much! This is wonderful, tracing back different conversations on the same topic. What a great collection!”

Angelina Castellini, about an earlier version of my “Yes, And...” list

Resourcefulness

Words by
KAY ROSS

“Can someone point me to a book list on Applied Improvisation?”

“What do you say when a workshop participant says, ‘Yeah, but sometimes at work you have to say no’?”

Those are typical of the many questions about Applied Improvisation that have been posted frequently on the AIN’s Facebook page or discussed in our conferences and Open Space sessions.

I’m an Applied Improvisation facilitator and an improv performer, and since about 2008 I’ve serendipitously come across thousands of articles, quotable quotes, videos, podcast episodes, websites and books about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics.

Confessions of a hoarder

I’m also a freelance editor, and my career has included compiling listings of events, particularly in the performing and visual arts, for the “South China Morning Post” newspaper and the Hong Kong Festival Fringe organisation. So I’ve applied that skill to finding, assessing and collating material about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics, from many sources. I’ve cherry-picked what I think is the most relevant and useful material, and compiled ever-growing lists of resources on various topics.

And I love sharing the resources I find with people who I think will benefit from them. So to answer the

two questions at the beginning of this article, here are two of my lists for you:

- **My list of books about Applied Improvisation, improv and related topics.** ↗ I’ve read lots of them, but not all of them. *Yet.*
- **My “Yes, And…” list.** ↗ What does this improv principle mean, and how applicable is it (or not) to life offstage? Opinions vary!



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAY ROSS

In them, you’ll find:

- evidence of the uses and effectiveness of Applied Improvisation (helpful for when you’re pitching to potential clients),
- advice, tips and suggestions about the history, theory, practice, business and ethics of Applied Improvisation,
- wisdom and tools from other relevant fields, such as management, coaching, psychology, education, facilitation, storytelling..., and
- ideas for workshop games, exercises and activities.

You’ll also be able to identify practitioners, academics and allied organisations around the world in

fields that interest you. So go ahead and contact them!

My resource-gathering philosophy

In my lists, I sometimes include short excerpts or my own comments, I include links wherever possible, and I feel an ethical responsibility to credit the source of the material.

Not all of the resources I gather are explicitly about Applied Improvisation. For example, I’ve seen articles about research by the “Harvard Business Review” and the World Economic Forum about the top skills that employees need. That’s useful information for us.

I don’t necessarily agree with everything the creators of the resources say, and that’s OK – as a former debater, I’m always curious to hear other people’s ideas. Also, I didn’t set out to gather every possible resource that’s available out there, but even so, I hope you find my lists useful.

In future issues I’ll share more of my lists, about such topics as failure, leadership, status and psychological safety.



KAY ROSS

Kay Ross is an Applied Improvisation facilitator, an improv performer and a marketing-minded freelance editor and copywriter. Her *The Playground of Possibilities* project offers a card deck and workshops that combine personal development and AI. She’s Australian and lives in Hong Kong. www.kayross.com www.playgroundofpossibilities.com

Improvisation is Zen in Western Context

Words by

BRIGHT SU

One lunch time in the late 1980s, I came home from middle school and found my dear Grandma sitting in the corner, sorting some long green beans. She smiled as I waited to eat.

“The experience can awaken our innate joy, freedom, self-expression and courage...”

She was focusing attentively on the beans. With a soft glance of full attention, she held one long string, touching each particle of bean inside to measure the same 2-inch lengths, before cutting that piece using only her fingers.

She was patiently slow. “Why don’t you use the knife? Chop, chop, chop!” I said.

I wanted fast... efficient... alpha. I just didn’t understand, until we fast forward 20 years later, when I start to take meditation training and improv workshops. I realize Grandma was being in the moment: the way of doing was her way of being.

Improvisation is Zen in a western context. Listen and observe; be aware mindfully; be here and now, whether you are in the living room, on the stage, in the office, with a crying child, or walking in the park.

Which is not to say it’s easy. It is a lifetime practice.

One of the beauties of improvisation for me is that we almost always do it with others, with fellow stage improvisers or Applied Improvisation practitioners in our lovely AIN community.

The Bhagavad Gita Hindu scripture says, “Yoga is the journey of the self through the self to the self”. Improvisation is the journey of the self through the others to the self.

Many people learn improv first through games designed to be interactive, engaging, challenging and interesting. The experience can awaken our innate joy, freedom, self-expression and courage. From theater games, improvisation takes us on a journey from “interesting form” to arrive at the deep formless. The latter is love and wisdom. With improvisation, we seek to operate fully in the moment - even automatically - at our best when in service to others.

Improvisation is a yin art form, that is to say feminine, maternal, tender, and sensual. Indeed, I meet many people in the improvisation circle who are caring and kind, with soft hearts.

My Grandma never answered my question verbally. But she did answer by her way of doing - and with no formal meditation or improvisation training.

That day, mindful of the beans, she was as ever taking a calming

break from her earlier housework. Parasympathetic regulation, if you like.

After lunch I took a nap. When I woke up, she was still with the beans and said, “Now that you’ve rested, go to school steadily and slowly.” She gave me a light touch and said, “I’ll take a nap now.” Grandma had made sure I woke up on time, keeping her eyes on me in her silent service. Yes, and she integrated such things into her everyday life. My Grandma is my mindfulness and improvisation hero.



JI XING XI JU
(IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE)



BRIGHT SU

Bright grew up in China, has lived in the US since 2001, and began studying improvisation in 2008. He is the author of “*Ji Xing Xi Ju*” (*Improvisational Theatre*), a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation, published in 2020. He serves as an editor for the *Applied Improvisation Magazine*. www.brightimprov.com



We Will Be Calling It Improvisation

Words by

PAUL Z JACKSON | [BIO LINK](#)

We had a productive session in Spain on 'The future of Applied Improvisation'. Paul Z Jackson made these notes, which convey the main points and perhaps the flavour of the event.

The big question facing us: 'What is the future of Applied Improvisation?'

A group of us at the AIN in SpAIN conference agreed upon a few propositions.

It is 'Improvisation'

We'll call it Improvisation - without apology. Improvisation is a phenomenon in its own right, observable in many fields of practice, and part of everyone's experience. So we can choose to approach it from how it shows up in everyday life, and explore it in its different manifestations. That's in contrast to seeing it (as some have traditionally)

as a specialist set of skills known only to an artistic elite who might graciously explain it and share it with the rest of us.

There is a diverse range of practitioners

Everyone experiences improvisation in their lives, and it is highlighted as part of the practice of many disciplines and professions. For example, theatre improv performers have made it famous, especially with the international TV success of *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. Jazz musicians have been long studied and admired. As dancers or spectators we enjoy improvised traditions of tango and flamenco.

And beyond the art, we see improvisation deep in organisations, practiced by coaches, therapists, facilitators and sports players. Wherever there's playfulness, in games or the everyday lives of children, there's improvisation.

It's possible for the community of improvisers to agree a family of principles or descriptions of improvisation

All would agree that a set of tenets will be attractive, useful and perhaps even desperately needed for various reasons - including human growth and well-being. They represent better responses to personal, organisational and social circumstances.

Which tenets are included in our definitions or descriptions of 'Improvisation'?

We offered a provisional list:

- Honouring the initial impulse - recognising the place of spontaneity
- Comfort with ambiguity
- Recognition of complexity and emergence





- Acceptance of (life's) offers
- Yes, And...

Improvisation is context sensitive

How improvisation is recognised, described or recommended will vary from context to context.

This *Three Wave* framework usefully accounts for three of the main perspectives which practitioners currently offer:

Wave 1

Theatre class – in which people learn various skills to be better equipped to perform improvised shows on stage (or TV etc), in front of an audience. This wave extends to offering an improv show as corporate entertainment.

Wave 2

Improvisation as a route to various professional and life skills, learned

in workshops and courses, often without 'improvisation' in the title.

Operating in this wave, the practitioner is well aware that 'all the world's a stage' is a metaphor and is able to teach improvisation without theatre. They don't depend on the theatrical basics of separating performer from audience, or requiring participants to play any role (other than themselves). In this wave we see a wider variety of activities and debriefs and other methods to upskill participants' confidence, teamwork, creativity, writing, leadership, medical practice, humanitarian rebuilding of damaged communities, communication of scientific knowledge, etc, etc... This wave depends notably on good facilitation, trainer and design skills.

Wave 3

Improvisation 'Without the games'. This is the realm of do-it-yourself improvisation, so it's a bit tougher

to describe and discover. Good examples include *The Quest*, *Street Wisdom* and everyday life improvisation.

“Everyone experiences improvisation in their lives, and it is highlighted as part of the practice of many disciplines and professions...”

In this guise, people are improvising (consciously), without the need for a workshop or training programme or expert improvisational facilitators. They learn through the experience of improvising, prompted by books, worksheets, games, apps and other inventive formats. If you ask them to describe their experience, instead of talking about performance formats or particular exercises, they'll go to the heart of the matter - the nature of presence, flow, collaboration, creativity and spontaneity.



LET'S DO THIS AGAIN SOON!

Please let us know what you think. Use [THIS LINK](#) to give us feedback on this issue. It will take only a few minutes.

You may be wondering where this magazine came from. Well, it emerged from discussions within the AIN Higher Education group, back in late 2021.

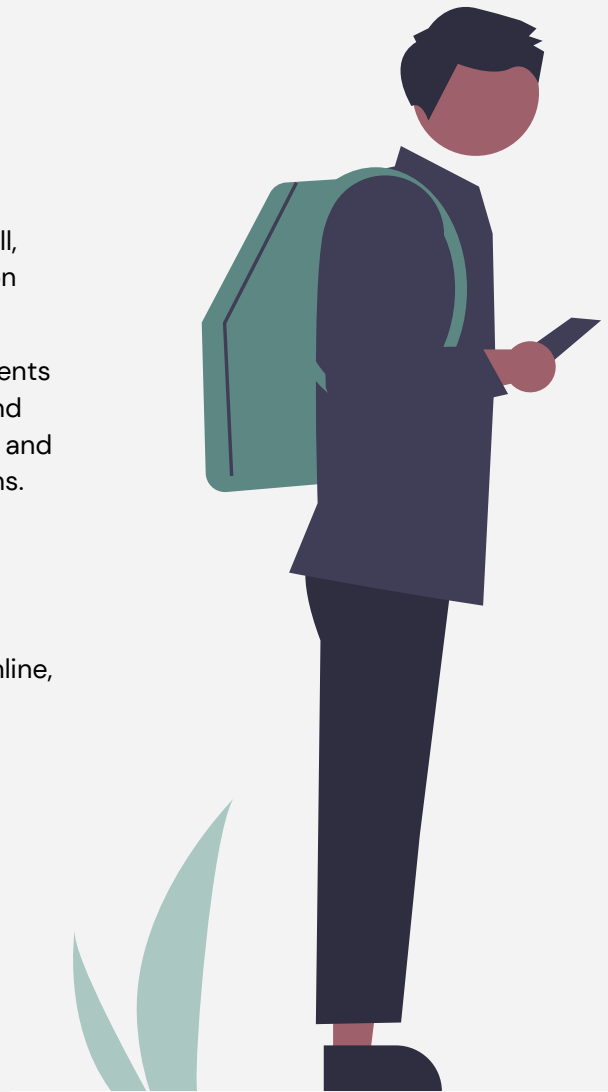
The group was intrigued to discover what the combined talents within AIN could produce. We asked for magazine writers and volunteers on AIN's Facebook page, on our Linked In groups and during the SpAIN conference and AIN's Open Space sessions.

We heard great enthusiasm for the project, with everyone foreseeing clear benefits for AIN (the network) and for the practice of Applied Improvisation (the field).

We plan to continue publication of future issues, starting online, with the solution for print on demand.

If you'd like to help with production, layout, editing, writing or marketing, please let us know at appliedimprovisationmagazine@gmail.com. You'll be most welcome to join us.

The AIM Editors
January 2023



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