

IMPOWERMENT IMPROV UNIT

LESSON 2: FAILURE

OBJECTIVE

To encourage students to embrace failure as a positive aspect rather than negative

DESCRIPTION

In improv, when we play it safe, our scenes become boring. They follow the same patterns. When something unexpected happens, like a slip of the tongue, a misinterpretation of a word, an assumption about something that is clearly wrong, when something fails, we call these gifts. Risk and failure go hand in hand. Invite and give students permission to take bigger risks than they might normally make otherwise. Mistakes can be magical, and improv exercises, such as the ones in this lesson, are a great way to practice making mistakes.

Time Management: This lesson is structured for one class period. A class period is defined as 75 minutes. However, do not get caught up in fitting these exercises in a set time. All times are just suggestions. Improv doesn't conform to a time limit! If students are enjoying the exercises, let them go longer. The more they do them, the more they will experience and explore the concepts of the unit. Additionally, the time exercises take will depend on the discussions that occur during the debrief questions. Again, if you're having worthwhile discussions, don't cut them short to fit a schedule.

INSTRUCTION

1. Entry Prompt (5 minutes)

- a. Students enter and respond to the entry prompt in their journals. If you don't use journals in your program, consider using the prompt as a discussion starter.
 - i. How do you feel about being wrong? Explain your answer.

2. The Rules of Engagement (1 minute)

- a. Repeat the Rules of Engagement, or have students repeat them.

3. Check-in (1 minute)

- a. Close your eyes and identify how you're feeling. This is just for you and not to be said out loud.
- b. Fill in the sentence: I feel (blank).

4. I've Got Your Back (1 minute)

- a. Have everyone move around the room, pat each other on the back, and say, "I've got your back."

5. Warm-ups (10 minutes)

a. Five Things

- i. **Objective:** To encourage failure without judgement
 - Form a circle.
 - Start the round. Have the person to the left of you give you a category.
 - Example: Breakfast cereals
 - Name five items in the category.
 - Usually when you play this game, you use real items, but I encourage you to go fictional instead.
 - Name five breakfast cereals that don't exist: "Sugar Rush!"
 - The group supports the person coming up with the items by counting down with them.
 - You: Sugar Rush! The Group: One!
 - You: Twigs and Bark! The Group: Two!
 - And so on until you reach five.
 - Now, you give a topic to the person on your right.
 - Example: Types of chairs.
 - This person has to come up with five fictional names as the group counts down.
 - Continue around the circle.

Debrief

This game can seem very dangerous, but it's actually quite imaginative and ripe for failure. Ask students: What were the funniest moments, and why were they funny? Highlight that when people took a risk and sold it in a big way, even if they felt like they failed, that is when they got the biggest laugh. Ask students: Why did we count as a group? It helps students to see that they are not alone. Improv is not about the individual—it's about the group. **Improv is a group mindset exercise.** This is another version of "I've got your back."

b. Props

- i. **Objective:** To build confidence in our choices, to create openness to inspiration
 - Have a variety of simple objects that you have easy access to.
 - Examples: a stapler, a roll of tape, a three-hole punch
 - Form a circle.
 - Start the round. Grab an object, such as a roll of masking tape.
 - Hold up the object and ask, "What is it?"
 - They will say exactly what it is. It's a roll of masking tape.
 - Now say, "Yes it is, but now, it's anything but."
 - Toss the object into the middle of the circle. Step into the circle (you should always go first), and demonstrate how to use this object in a new way.
 - For example, you take the roll of tape and put it on your finger saying "Yes I will marry you!"
 - Toss the object back into the centre of the circle and invite students to step in and use the object in a new way.
 - Repeat.
 - This exercise often goes on for a long time, and I find students enjoy it.
 - Just when you think the exercise is slowing down, call out "*Five more rounds!*" You may see your students getting really creative!
 - Even though I've asked them to only do five rounds, I'll let them keep going if they've become re-inspired.

Debrief

Ask students: How was that experience for you? If some struggled or they say "I have no ideas," that's fine. It happens. Sometimes, it's just about stepping forward and putting the object in their hand. Putting the object in their hand can actually trigger an idea and get them out of their heads.

6. Exercises (41 minutes)

a. New Choice

i. Objective: To break out of our patterns

- Have everyone pair up.
- Invite one pair to the front and give them a task they can do together in a scene.
 - Example: baking a cake or building a snowman
- Let the scene begin, and after it's gone on for 30 seconds, interrupt the scene by calling out "New Choice!"
 - For example, if the student says "pass me the flour," call out "New Choice! "The student needs to change their offer, such as "pass me the rutabaga."
- The scene continues incorporating each new offer the students make. It's up to them to justify those offers and incorporate them into the scenes.
- Invite another pair up to take on a new scene with a task.
 - If you want a lower-stakes version, have everyone do the scenes at once, each improving on the same task and each making their own new offers when you call out "New Choice!"

Debrief

Ask students: What was it like to have to rewrite on the fly? What was it like when your new choices seemed ridiculous? Was it a failure? It was not! Ask students: Can you see the failure as a gift? It always turns out that strong choices are never a failure.

b. Rants

i. Objective: To allow students to creatively fail

- Have five or six students come into the playing area.
- Assign each student a topic they are going to rant about. It must be a topic they know nothing about.
 - Example: microbiology, the metric system, Japanese Kanji
 - This is important. They have to be passionate about their topic and really sell it even though they don't know what they're talking about. The less they know about the topic, the better things go.
- Stand/sit in front of the row of participating students. Point at one student. That student has to start ranting on their topic.

- Choose when to stop pointing at that person and point at someone else.
 - What we want to encourage by going back and forth is to inspire our ranters to go bigger.
 - If someone is playing small in their rant and they see/hear someone beside them going big, it often helps them go bigger too.

Debrief

Ask students: How was that for you? How was it to talk about something you know nothing about? We often think we have to have all the facts right, but the more passionate you are, the funnier it is. The more you fail, the more successful the exercise.

7. Concept: If You're Going to Fail, Fail Big (5 minutes)

- Share with students: *In improv, when we play it safe, our scenes become boring. They follow the same patterns. When something unexpected happens, like a slip of the tongue, a misinterpretation of a word, an assumption about something that is clearly wrong, then we call these gifts. Mistakes can be magical, making our scene work more fun or dramatically interesting. We just have to embrace the mistakes rather than be embarrassed or apologize for them. There are no wrong choices, just strong choices.*
- Risk and failure go hand in hand. Take bigger risks than you might normally make otherwise. It's always more dramatically interesting to fail big. That's when you get the biggest laugh. It's not about trying to be funny. It's about passionate failure. It's about creative failure. It's failing big, making a big choice and selling it like crazy. That's where you are going to get the biggest laugh. To try something is a weak choice. We want to remove "try" from the conversation.*
- Ask students: How can you embrace the concept of *If you're going to fail, fail big* in your classwork?

8. Check-out (1 minute)

- Close your eyes and identify how you're feeling. This is just for you and not to be said out loud.
- Fill in the sentence: I feel (blank).
- Are you the same or different than you were at the beginning of class?

9. Exit Slip (5 minutes)

- a. In the last five minutes, students respond to the exit slip question and hand it in as they leave class.
 - i. Reflect and respond to the statement "There are no wrong choices, just strong choices."

ASSESSMENT

- Process assessment: How are students engaged in the lesson? (active listening, collaboration, discussion participation, effort)
- Skills assessment: How are students demonstrating skills? (e.g., focus, physical engagement, vocal engagement)