

IMPOWERMENT IMPROV UNIT

LESSON 1: RISK-TAKING

OBJECTIVE

To encourage students to take risks and allay fear

DESCRIPTION

Risk is an important part of life. If we can use improv to teach students how to get out from behind their own fears and take a risk, this is an amazing life lesson. Through the warm-ups and exercises in this lesson, we have the opportunity to show students what it means to take a risk and that it's okay. This is not the same as jumping out of an airplane. We risk and it's fine. We didn't spontaneously combust. We're also going to introduce the idea of *I've got your back*. Improv is about taking risks and chances and trusting that our ideas will be supported and built upon by others.

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.

Debriefing: The debrief is key to this work; it is as important as the exercise. The debrief is what gives the exercise context. It's in a debrief where you will have interesting conversations with your students. We want them to talk about what they're experiencing. If they take nothing else away from it, the conversations will stay with them.

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. Would you describe yourself as a risk taker? Why or why not?

2. The Rules of Engagement (5 minutes)

- a. In order to create an environment where students can trust and feel supported, start by creating a set of "rules" that will govern their risk-taking.
- b. Ask students: What rules do you want to include?
 - i. Students usually offer up rules similar to these: be kind to one another, support each other's ideas, don't swear or use mean words, don't hit one another.

- ii. This is a good point to incorporate any school or district policies when it comes to language and physical contact.
- c. Establish the rules and repeat them at the beginning of every session.

3. Warm-ups (10 minutes)

a. Greeting

- i. **Objective:** To get students to instinctually act rather than think

1. Round 1

- Students move about the room.
- On your signal, they are to start greeting each other as themselves as they move.
- All they have to do is say "hello" or "hi." Nothing more.
- Let this play out for 30 seconds.

2. Round 2

- Students move about the room.
- This time, give them direction:
 - *Say hello as if you're super excited to see each other.*
 - *Say hello as if you're all cowboys.*
 - *Say hello as if you're all superheroes.*
 - *Say hello as you're all politicians on the campaign trail.*
- **Side-coaching note:** If you notice students are reluctant to take a risk and try on a persona, encourage them to borrow from others.
 - *For example, if they're asked to be a superhero and they don't know what to do, encourage them to look at what others are doing. They can borrow a pose or a physical stance to see if that helps them get into the character. See if they can tap into this borrowed energy, and let it spark their imagination.*
- **Time Management:** The objective is for students to get out of their heads. If students are having fun, let this exercise go on as long as you can. Try not to manage the time with these exercises.

Debrief

Ask students: What personas were easier or harder to do? What was it like to be the politician? Does playing a confident character come naturally to you or is it challenging? Did it feel like you were taking a risk playing this game? Point out they were taking risks all along, saying hello, itself, is a risk. Playing a character out of their comfort zone is a risk.

b. Clap Focus

- i. **Objective:** To make eye contact, to make a strong direct choice
- ii. **Round 1**
 - Form a circle.
 - You should start this game. Look across the circle at a student (Person B), make eye contact, and send a clap to them.
 - Interpret this however you like. It's all about focus and making a strong direct choice. Support the eye contact with a clap.
 - The clap: Lengthen your right arm straight out in front of you. Your hand is flat, the palm is to the side with the thumb on top. You bring your left hand to meet your right and clap your hands.
 - Person B's job is to make eye contact with you and accept the clap.
 - Again, interpret this however you like. What gesture will represent accepting the clap?
 - Person B turns to Person C across the circle, makes eye contact, and sends the clap to them. Person C makes eye contact with Person B and accepts the clap.
 - The game continues on with students making eye contact, sending the clap, making eye contact, and accepting the clap.

Don't worry if the first round is slow - this is a great place to stop and debrief.

Debrief

Ask students: Does it matter who you clap at? It does not; you just have to clap at someone. Then draw attention to their body language. Are they standing with their arms or legs crossed? Do they have their hands in their pockets? If they are, this is making it harder for them to hear or receive the clap. You are not trying to correct them in this situation. Create awareness around their body language.

When we open up, we feel vulnerable. This is scary.

- Have everyone take a deep breath together, stretch up their arms, and bring their arms down to their sides. Do this three times. On the last one, yawn audibly on the way down.
- Ask them to take note of where their arms are now, and if they feel their arms starting to cross again or their hands going into their pockets during the game play, to think about returning to this open posture.
- Then we go back to playing the game. They usually see and experience the difference the second time around. Now the game tends to go much faster and much more smoothly.

iii. Round 2

- Return to the game.
- You should start this round as well. Look across the circle at a student (Person B), make eye contact, and send a clap to them.
- Person B's job is to make eye contact with you and accept the clap.
- Person B turns to Person C across the circle, makes eye contact, and sends the clap to them. Person C makes eye contact with Person B and accepts the clap.

Debrief

Ask students: How did the first round compare to the second round? What was it like to look people in the eyes? For some people, this is going to be the biggest risk of all, just looking other people across the circle in the eye. Ask students: What is it like when we don't look people in the eye? That is usually when the game falls apart. For those who are anxious, this is a great opportunity to talk about dealing with things that are overwhelming.

In this game, students only have two objectives: to establish eye contact with someone and make a strong direct choice by sending the clap to them. By breaking down the task, it makes the whole game seem less overwhelming and scary.

4. Exercises (37 minutes)

a. Yes, and

- i. **Objective:** to say yes to people's ideas, even when we're inclined to say no
- ii. **Round 1**
 - Start with a round of *No, because*.
 - Have students break into pairs and find a place to sit where they can hear each other.
 - In their pairs, Partner A suggests where they'd like to have class next week:
 - *Next week, let's have class on the moon.*
 - To which, Partner B replies with a sentence starting with "No, because."
 - *No, because I don't like lunar surfaces.*
 - Partner A must continue pitching their idea, and Partner B keeps saying "No, because . . ."

iii. Round 2

- After a few minutes, switch. Now Partner B pitches their idea for where to have class next week:
 - *Next week, let's have class in a ditch.*
- This time, Partner A responds with "yes, and."
 - *Yes, and we can collect parasites for science class while we're there.*
- The conversation continues, but this time Partner B is invited to use "yes, and" in their responses.

Debrief

Ask students: How did the *No, because* conversations compare to the *Yes, and* ones?

Often, they'll say *No, because* made them feel discouraged or frustrated—the conversation constantly has to start over. If they say that they liked saying "no," or it was good, reframe the question to ask if they thought they were succeeding in convincing their friend.

For the *Yes, and* conversation, they'll often say it was easier to build upon. For those who claim they like saying "no, because," I point out that it's always easier to say no, but it's a bigger risk to say yes. Point out the effect that saying "no" has versus saying "yes." "No" leaves people feeling crappy. It's harder to find consensus and build on an idea. And then it can also affect how others feel about you.

"Yes" leads us somewhere. Even if we don't 100 percent love the idea, saying yes gives us direction, and this is not about being a robot or a doormat. It's about finding a way to work with someone's idea to create something bigger and better. If you have time, you can throw in an exercise to support *Yes, and* such as *Yes, let's* or *Gift Giving*. You'll find these exercises at the end of the unit.

b. Thank You Statues

- i. **Objective:** To take a risk even when you don't want to
- ii. Round 1
 - Form a circle.
 - Start the round by standing in the circle and striking a pose.
 - I usually do something like stand with my arms raised like a ballerina.
 - Ask students: If I were a statue, what might I be a statue of? What might I be doing?
 - Invite students to shout out whatever ideas they have. At the end, point out that ALL of their answers were correct. I could be a ballerina or the Statue of Liberty or holding a really big baby. Everyone sees different things, and there is no one right answer.

- Invite someone to join you in the circle and strike a complementary pose.
 - There does not need to be physical contact, but it should look like the two poses go together to form one statue.
 - If students look terrified at the idea of going into the circle, tell them it doesn't matter what pose they strike so long as they do something.
- Once someone joins you in the circle and strikes a complementary pose, say "thank you" and leave the circle, leaving the student to hold the pose.
 - The "thank you" is important. You are thanking the student for accepting your idea and finding a way to work with it.
- Invite another student from the outside of the circle to go into the centre and form a new complementary pose.
- When they do, the first student says *thank you* and leaves the circle.
- Repeat this for a few rounds and then debrief.

Debrief

Ask students: How is it to stand in the middle of the circle? If someone says they were having a hard time keeping their balance (with a tricky pose, a yoga pose for example), ask the question: Did the complementary poses matter? The answer is no. Students will say they just wanted someone to join them in the middle, so that they could leave.

Ask students on the outside of the circle, especially those who didn't go in: Why didn't we go in the circle? If no one responds, bring up examples: *I didn't have any ideas. My ideas weren't good enough. I didn't know what to do.* I point out that these were moments when we're scared to take a risk.

This is not about shaming anyone. You want to identify how many people feel this exact way all the time. They are not alone. Then I tell them how they can overcome this fear.

iii. Round 2

- Continue playing the game as before. This time, invite students into the centre one at a time. No one can sit out.
 - I instruct them that if they're feeling nervous or anxious while standing on the outside of the circle, waiting for their turn, to remember their task.
 - Their task is to walk into the circle, look at what their friend is doing, and trust that they'll know exactly what it is they need to do.
 - If you see students crossing their arms or putting their hands back in their pockets, remind them to go back to those open postures we talked about in Clap Focus.

- During Round 2, each student goes into the circle one at a time, and this time they rock it.
- Debrief again.

Debrief

Ask students: How do the two rounds compare? They usually say that the second round was easier and more fun. Remind them that all they have to do is break down the task: walk into the circle, strike a pose. Point out that they took a risk and they were fine.

c. I'm a

i. **Objective:** To reinforce what students have learned so far

- Form a circle.
- Start the round by going into the circle.
 - I usually hold up my arms and say, "I'm a tree."
- Ask students what might go with a tree, pointing out that this is a word-association exercise.
- Someone might call out "a leaf." Invite them to come into the circle and stand like they are a leaf.
 - If they give me a look of terror, I just say, "Come in and strike a pose. It doesn't matter what you do so long as you say 'I am a leaf.'"
- Ask those in the circle what else might go with a tree and a leaf.
- Someone might call out a bird. Invite them into the centre to strike a pose.
- Continue until students stop calling out ideas. Now, the first person, in this case you, chooses someone to leave behind. For example, the bird.
- Everyone goes back to the outside of the circle.
 - If the person left behind looks at you with terror, remind them they've already done the task that was required of them. They're standing like a bird. They just have to repeat it to remind everyone in the circle what they are.
- From here, build a new tableau inspired by the bird.
- Someone might call out a birdhouse or the sky, and you invite students into the circle to strike a pose and state what they are with a "I'm a . . ."
- I find students tend to enjoy this exercise. Continue playing for as long as you like or time allows
- Definitely end with an all play in which everyone in the class is involved in one tableau. Make sure everyone goes in at least one.

Debrief

This is an end-of-class game so there isn't a big debrief here. But do point out that everyone took a risk and they lived through it.

With risk, we have the opportunity to show students what it means to take a risk and that it's okay. This is not the same as jumping out of an airplane. We risk and it's fine. We didn't spontaneously combust.

Risk is an important part of life. If we can use improv to teach students how to get out from behind their own fears and take a risk, this is an amazing life lesson.

5. Concept: I've Got Your Back (3 minutes)

- a. Improv is about taking risks and chances and trusting that our ideas will be supported and built upon by others. Support is important.
- b. *I've Got Your Back* is something I've done many times as an improviser before going on stage with my fellow performers. We go around to everybody in the room, touch them on the back, and say out loud "I've got your back."
- c. I said earlier that no physical contact is necessary. But in this case, I find the physical contact actually unifies and connects the group (they can tap each other on the shoulder as well). It also reminds us that we're in this together. It's a good concept to introduce to students because it helps them to relax and take away some of their anxiety. They are not alone. Improv is a group mindset.
- d. Have everyone move around the room, pat each other on the back or shoulder and say, "I've got your back."
- e. Say to students: *This is something we're going to include at the beginning of our lessons, starting tomorrow.*

6. 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. Which game felt like the biggest risk today? Explain your answer.

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)