

Why improvise?

**THE BENEFITS OF
IMPROVISATION FOR ANYONE**

Ryan Millar

Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
IMPROV FOR OURSELVES	5
BREEDING IDEAS	7
DON'T BE CREATIVE – DO CREATIVE	9
FEAR OF FAILURE IS A MISTAKE	11
BE A STORYTELLER	13
THE RISK IS IN NOT DOING	15
FEEL THE FLOW	17
COMMIT TO IT AND DON'T QUIT	19



INTRODUCTION

“Man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” – Oliver Wendell Holmes

Improvisation has caught on. After initially being a somewhat obscure performance pursuit, to providing exercises for first-year drama students, then becoming stand-up and sketch comedy’s annoying little brother, improv has – in recent years – finally arrived.

Many of the top comedy performers working today have a background in improv, like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Seth Meyers and Julia Louis-Dreyfus. Plus you’ve got Kay Cannon (writer of *Pitch Perfect* and *Pitch Perfect 2*), Mike Birbiglia (writer/director of *Sleepwalk with Me*, *Don’t Think Twice*), Jordan Peele (writer/director of *Get Out*), and Oscar-winner Adam McKay (director of *Talladega Nights* and *The Big Short*). Among many many others.

Add to that list a diverse crop of touring stand-ups, podcast hosts, comedy writers and more who make up much of the entertainment industry, and it suggests there’s something in improv training that can translate into showbiz success. Many of the best and brightest have honed their creativity and comedic voice on improv stages and in workshops and classes.

But the applicability of improv skills isn’t just in entertainment. Business too has recognised the benefits of improv training – from improvisation modules in MBA programmes to afternoon workshops and weekend retreats for departments and teams, all the way down to individuals taking performance improv courses at the behest of a well-meaning line manager.

I think I’ve made my point: improv is useful. But the question is *how*; what specifically does improv offer that makes it such an effective cross-discipline skill?

Well, I’m glad you asked!

Broadly speaking, improv training touches on and improves: spontaneity, active listening, storytelling, public speaking, collaboration, creativity and innovation, and being a good partner/team member. It’s also more than the sum of its parts. And fun.

This short primer is to help you understand what improv is and how it can affect you. If, after you’re done reading, you find yourself eager to learn more, the best thing to do is take a drop-in workshop. Or, better yet, sign up for a class. If there’s nothing going on near you, organise an evening with some friends. Email me – I’ll give you some games and exercises to try.

To paraphrase a Chinese proverb: the best time to start was 10 years ago. The second best time is now.

A photograph of a baseball player in a white uniform and black helmet, captured in the middle of a powerful swing. The player is wearing white batting gloves and is positioned on a dirt base on a green field. The background is slightly blurred, showing other players and spectators. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the text "IMPROV FOR OURSELVES" in bold, black, uppercase letters.

**IMPROV FOR
OURSELVES**

“You can’t think and hit a baseball at the same time.” – Yogi Berra

Improv is a way of working and a skill, both of which can be trained. Some people get frustrated when they first try it because it’s not easy as it looks.

But that’s true for just about anything done well: gymnastics, playing the guitar, driving a monster truck... Someone who has practiced enough to become a master hides all the years of training in a seemingly effortless set of actions.

And, like anything else, to get good at improv you need to start with the basics – the equivalent of stretches and somersaults – before you’re doing backflips. Improv ability is a muscle that needs to be exercised; the more you exercise, the faster you get into shape.

And the beauty of improv is that it’s not some esoteric specialised skill either – many of the tools of improvisation are simply advanced communication skills. They directly translate into improved relationships and greater personal impact.

And they come from playing games and being silly; how great is that? These attributes are often neglected or trained out of us as we grow older and we’re expected to ‘be serious’.

As we leave behind childish behaviours, we unfortunately all too often leave behind childlike wonder and a sense of play and discovery. And as we get further and further along the path to adulthood, the value we place on that ability to play and have fun keeps decreasing, until eventually it’s all but gone.

Improv helps us reconnect to that sense of play and fun. But to do so we need to suspend judgements and allow ourselves to make mistakes and be silly. When we do that, great things happen.

One of those great things is the practice of letting ourselves have fun and play. Improvisation helps us worry less about the consequences and direction of what we’re doing, so we can stay in the present moment and follow our impulses. When it’s done well, the results can be magnificent, and when not done well, the results can still be pretty good. From the simple act of just doing, our lives start to change. It might be a small shift, but it can have a significant impact.

Some people worry that they need to be funny to improvise. But improvisation isn’t comedy. It is no more *comedy* than a pen is writing. Rather improv is, like a pen, a tool; an instrument that can be applied however the user sees fit. Improvisation is often used to make comedy, but it can just as usefully be applied to any type of art or craft, or professional setting. And of course it can also be funny. Which is great, because being funny and having fun are closely related.

A photograph of several rabbits in a garden. In the foreground, a large brown rabbit is on the left, and a smaller light-colored rabbit is on the right. In the center, a white rabbit is partially visible. The background is filled with green foliage and various flowers, including red and yellow ones. A semi-transparent white box with a thin black border is centered over the image, containing the text "BREEDING IDEAS" in bold black letters.

**BREEDING
IDEAS**

"Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen."

- John Steinbeck

We live in a world where the idea is king. Everybody wants that one great idea. So we ignore or discard those which we think aren't great ideas to keep our mind free to receive that flash of genius. But great ideas don't come if we try to keep ideas away.

Ideas beget ideas.

Picture ideas as a kind of family tree. A single idea, properly nurtured, will lead to more ideas, which will lead to more ideas, and very soon the tree flourishes. And, just like a family tree, if any branch stops creating descendants, it withers.

Coming up with ideas, and building on them, is an ability. The more you do it, the better you get. Though it might be a struggle at first, it gets easier over time. Individual ideas are in and of themselves not special; the ability to create ideas, strengthen them and help them evolve is what matters. When we train our minds to develop ideas, to embrace them and play with them, more ideas will flow.

Improv is nothing so much as an idea playground – a chance to collaboratively explore collective ideas and notions. Doing so is great brain training – improv will make you a better, more resourceful thinker.

A woman in a white suit is standing on a metal ladder, splashing purple paint. The background features a large, vibrant pink splash. The text is centered within a white rectangular box with a thin black border.

**DON'T BE
CREATIVE - DO
CREATIVE**

“Creativity is not a talent. It is a way of operating.” – John Cleese

Improv is the art of making things up on the spot. It sounds terrifying to many people, but the good news is that we do this literally *all the time in every aspect of our life*.

However, we tend to develop predictable patterns, of safe and familiar ways of doing, thinking and being. These patterns tend to cut us off from what’s new and unfamiliar. Which of course keeps us feeling comfortable – for all the good and bad that comes with that.

Improv can give us the freedom and flexibility to accept and play with new ideas. It offers us a collaborative mindset, and the ability to look at common practices and situations in interesting ways (and to look at unfamiliar situations in very direct ways).

When we improvise, we listen intently, respond in the moment, and make instant connections. Sure, occasionally mistakes are made, and failure does happen, but in spite (and sometimes because) of these incidents, new possibilities and directions present themselves.

Those new possibilities and new combinations? *That’s* creativity.

A woman in a black dress is walking on a ledge high above a city skyline. She is looking down and has her arms outstretched, suggesting a sense of fear or uncertainty. The city below is a dense urban landscape with many skyscrapers. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

**FEAR OF
FAILURE IS A
MISTAKE**

“Nothing will stop you being creative more effectively than the fear of making a mistake.” – John Cleese

Making ideas into realities is a creative pursuit, whether one is an inventor, innovator, entrepreneur, writer or artist. It involves risk, and it thus involves failure. A lot of it. As Thomas Edison famously said “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” What he means, of course, is that we must fail if we are ever to succeed.

A related issue is our approach to mistakes. Conventional wisdom tells us that we shouldn’t make them. But conventional wisdom is wrong: mistakes can lead to wonderful things. Take, for example, the case of the Post-it note.

The Post-It note

The ubiquitous Post-it note was invented by accident. Well, two accidents actually. The first one was in 1968, when Spencer Silver, a 3M engineer, was trying to create a superpowered glue for use in the construction of airplanes. One of his failed attempts was a low-tack adhesive with two interesting features: it could be peeled off a surface without leaving any residue, and it was reusable. Silver couldn’t think of how this would be useful, but he knew it was promising.

For five years he tried unsuccessfully to get his colleagues enthusiastic, but nothing came of it. In 1974 an engineer in St Paul, Minnesota, named Art Fry had a moment. A choir singer, Fry was annoyed by his page markers slipping around and falling out of his hymnals. He came up with bookmarks that stick to the page – using this low-tack pressure-sensitive glue he’d seen in a seminar. The first few tries didn’t work well, but eventually they got it right. Soon enough Post-it notes caught on, and today they’re one of the most well-known and best-selling office-supply products in the world.

Instead of seeing things for what they’re not, we can enjoy what they are. Anyone who’s felt that their career choice, passion, hobby, or partner was a disappointment to their parents has experienced this frustration. If your parents desperately want you to be a doctor, they might miss out on the joy and pride they could experience from seeing you be a happy and talented cabinetmaker. Or dog groomer. Or high-school basketball coach. They miss out on what ‘is’ because they only see what ‘isn’t’. Unmet expectations can sometimes be a genuine problem, but other times they’re just preventing you from seeing that you’re about to revolutionize the stationery game.

The other way failure inhibits us is by creating ‘bad’ pressure. This is the anxiety and stress that can paralyse us. That desire to ‘do well’, rather than just to ‘do’. In one experiment psychologists offered university students a financial reward if they could fall asleep faster. Not a single student earned that money.

By heaping pressure on ourselves, we almost inevitably don’t achieve the results we seek. And, what’s worse, we reject play. This makes room for seriousness and tension to creep in, creating the conditions for failure to flourish.

Improvisation takes a different approach: it actually embraces failure, thus creating the conditions for multiple successes, and providing time and space for seemingly bad ideas to become good ones. As football great Johan Cruyff said: “Every disadvantage has its advantage.”

A globe of the Earth is shown against a blue background. Several hands of different skin tones are reaching up from the bottom, touching the globe. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the globe, containing the text "BE A STORYTELLER".

**BE A
STORYTELLER**

“Those who tell the stories rule the world.” – Hopi (Native American) proverb

An understanding of stories – how they’re structured, why they work, what they mean, how we relate to them – will give our work greater resonance, and guide our thinking and impulses while we’re creating. Heck, it’ll help refine our understanding of things even when we’re not creating.

A deeper appreciation of stories and storytelling will also help us understand business, art, sports, entertainment, friends and family. Storytelling isn’t just a buzzword in business management and marketing: it’s a vital part of the human experience – one that’s been around as long as humans have.

For those of us who are writers, the storytelling and narrative elements we’ll work on in improv will augment and supplement what we do, and give us new tools to use in the story-creation process. For those of us who aren’t writers or storytellers, we’ll find that notion challenged by the work we’ll be doing. By understanding stories better, and creating them on the fly, we’ll be better positioned to see stories, and relate them.

A close-up photograph of a hand in a white shirt cuff balancing a pencil on its tip. Several other pencils are scattered on a reflective surface around the hand. The background is a blurred image of a person in a blue suit and striped tie. A semi-transparent grey box with a thin black border is centered over the image, containing the text.

**THE RISK IS IN
NOT DOING**

“If you are not willing to risk the unusual, you will have to settle for the ordinary.” – Jim Rohn

As mentioned, reality is unscripted, and in almost all cases we experience things that are different than what we expect. By being able to prepare for the unexpected, we allow ourselves the ability to be flexible and adapt. As Malcolm Gladwell writes in *Blink*: “How good people’s decisions are under the fast-moving, high-stress conditions of rapid cognition is a function of training and rules and rehearsal.”

And that’s exactly why improv is taught at places like Harvard Business School, Columbia Business School and Guardian Masterclasses. Not specifically because it’s applicable in professional settings, but because it’s applicable *in all settings*. By training ourselves to deal with uncertainty, and to thrive in those circumstances, we are able to not just cope with daily life, but to thrive on adversity. Where others might see confusion, we can see opportunity and patterns.

But seeing opportunity is one thing; being able to act on it is entirely another. And improvisation gives us both the willingness and the ability to do so.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a patterned dress, is lying back in a grassy field. Her head is tilted upwards, and her eyes are closed. The background is a soft-focus green landscape. The text "FEEL THE FLOW" is overlaid in the center of the image.

FEEL THE FLOW

“Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act.” – Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

It’s said that Jackson Pollock, the famous abstract painter, painted entirely on rhythm and feel. He said of his process: “When I am in my painting, I’m not aware of what I’m doing”. That complete focus on activity, being consumed by it, is known as ‘flow’.

Like Pollock, when we’re really engaged, we may have difficulty remembering the details of an experience afterwards. It’s as if so much of our brain is concentrated on the experience that there’s none left to act as note-taker. It happens to joggers, video-game players, accountants... Anyone who performs at a high level experiences this flow.

When the challenge meets our ability in such a way that the two are in a dance together, time ceases to have meaning: we are fully consumed in something and it’s exhilarating.

Improv is a shortcut to the flow state. In doing improv you are almost always and immediately, in flow. And flow is like any other state – the more you do it, the better you get at it, and the easier it is to return to it. So find your flow in improv, and you can take that with you to your other pursuits.



**COMMIT TO
IT AND DON'T
QUIT**

“Commitment is an act, not a word.” – Jean-Paul Sartre

Commitment is what ties all of the above together. Without it, any sort of meaningful achievement is impossible. But, just by making a choice to commit, we start to see results. And progress. And growth. The more we commit, the better it goes. Sometimes the rewards are external (awards, recognition, records). And sometimes they're solely internal (improved focus, purpose, sense of wellbeing).

The Yogi Berra quote at the very beginning of this ebook (“You can't think and hit a baseball at the same time”), is a succinct reminder of how crucial commitment is; only by being completely in the moment, totally focused, that place of doing-not-thinking is where big swings become big hits.

Think of any person at the top of their field, and ask yourself if they got there with half-assed attempts. Nope. Sure, they may have gotten lucky, or had some unique opportunities but they all brought and continue to bring hard work (commitment) with them. Same goes with anything you care about, or want to try.

You may not want to be a professional improviser, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't treat it with respect. And if you're just improvising for fun, then commit fully to having that fun. You get out what you put in. Enjoy.