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## **Remembering to Laugh and Explore: Improvisational Activities for Literacy Teaching in Urban Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

In an effort to push back against contextual factors that have constrained arts instruction and integration while recognizing that schools have limited resources, The Second City Training Center in Chicago has developed several educational programs that bring the art of improvisation to teachers and students. This article specifically focuses on the outreach program called *The Second City Educational Program* (TSCEP). Initial data analysis suggests that the strategies that The Second City artists-in-residence used with teachers and their students contributed to individual students' self-efficacy and strengthened classroom community, making possible the opportunity for students who had previously been marginalized to take on more positive roles in their classrooms and creating

inclusive spaces for children with special needs. The young people's increased engagement led to confidence with expression, helping them to extend their authoring abilities in both spoken and written forms and to take on the identity of "author."

### **Introduction**

Laughter, jokes, and comedy are what usually come to mind when The Second City of Chicago is mentioned. We don't often think of education and literacy learning when we talk about this famous institution whose alumni include the Belushi brothers, Tina Fey, and Bonnie Hunt. As The Second City grew in its reputation, many young actors landed at the doorstep, hoping to learn improvisation from the greats. Soon, the theater offered classes in improvisation and comedy sketch writing for adults. Although plenty of aspiring artists have come to The Second City to hone their skills, the need for courses that focus on imaginative expression is not limited to adults hoping to enter show business. The directors of The Second City realized early on that school-aged children need opportunities to engage in the creative process, and that those opportunities may not always come through the work routinely offered in classrooms, particularly in financially stressed urban centers.

We live in an era when educators throughout the U.S. are feeling pressure to increase students' academic performance on standardized tests, especially in the areas of literacy and mathematics. As a result, many schools' curricula are being narrowed (McNeil, 2000; Popham, 1999; Wood, 2004), with time allocated to fine arts offerings increasingly cut in favor of time spent focusing on "academic" content. Such narrowing is regrettable in its own right, as well as in light of the research base that supports the connections between the types of engaging, interactive instruction that is routinely associated with fine arts programs and deep learning in more traditional academic subject areas (Gullat, 2008; Hanna, 1994; Newmann, Bryk, & Nagaoka, 2001; Smith, Newmann, & Lee, 2001; Zemelman, Daniels, & Bizar, 1999). Furthermore, current curricular reductionism positions literacy as a set of discrete skills most useful for answering multiple-choice test questions or for writing formulaic test essays, ignoring socially-situated models of literacy (see, e.g., Alvermann, Hinchmann, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Edelsky, 1996; Gee 1996, 1999; McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Pérez, 1998; Street, 1995), which embrace the notion that language is best learned in purposeful use, as a means through which individuals "read and write their world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

In an effort to push back against contextual factors that have constrained arts instruction and integration while recognizing that schools have limited resources, The Second City Training Center in Chicago has developed several educational programs which bring the art of improvisation to teachers and students. The study described in this article specifically focuses

on the outreach program called The Second City Educational Program (TSCEP). Funded by the Kraft foundation, artists in residence from The Second City Training Center provide educators in grant participating Chicago public schools with training, curriculum development, and performance programs in improvisation. Our involvement as researchers came when we were asked to evaluate the impact of TSCEP on teachers' literacy instruction and on students' literacy learning in three K-8 Chicago public schools. We observed positive impacts in several areas, and although our work is exploratory in nature, we believe it corroborates other studies that show the benefits of drama and theater arts in the classroom, and that it points to the potential for such work to make even greater contributions to literacy pedagogy and student learning.

Specifically, four themes emerged in our initial data analysis. First, the playfulness inherent in the art of improvisation engaged the students wholly in the activities, increasing the involvement even of youngsters who had been reluctant to participate in other classroom work. Secondly, this engagement strengthened classroom community, making possible the opportunity for students who had previously been marginalized and/or who had special learning needs to take on more positive roles in their classrooms. Third, particular children's increased engagement led to confidence with expression, which helped them to extend their authoring abilities in both spoken and written forms and to take on the identity of "author." Finally, for most of the teachers, participating in training workshops and collaborating with visiting artists in their classrooms helped to expand their repertoire of pedagogical strategies and began to broaden their definition of literacy beyond what Shannon (1995) calls a psychological view and Street (1995) calls an autonomous model of literacy that emphasizes mere "correctness" of language use and that is based on the belief that reading and writing are best learned one sub-skill at a time. Rather, the improvisation work moved the teachers toward creation of classroom environments in which all the various modes of expression that their students brought to their schoolwork were valued, environments that operated from what Larson (2006) refers to as a *multiple literacies* perspective.

Not surprisingly, the climate and culture of the school in which TSCEP was implemented, as well as the personality of the individual teacher and climate and culture of each individual classroom, affected the extent to which positive effects were seen. In addition, the limitations of the study preclude our making claims as to the effects of the strategies on standardized test scores, although analysis of the skills involved in the various activities suggests strong alignment with both the NCTE/IRA Standards and the State Goals for Learning in Illinois, where the study took place (see Appendix). As a result, we feel confident that the types of drama/theater activities represented in the TSCEP curriculum have an important place in literacy pedagogy today.

### **Brief Overview of the Research Project**

During the first six months of 2005, we implemented a qualitative research study in which we spent time with elementary school teachers, their students, and artists from The Second City Training Center's Educational Program. The qualitative research paradigm is appropriate for this study because "Qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal stories and the ways in which they intersect" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p.7). Analysis of the data generated from the classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student artifacts built a picture of the participating teachers and students as they explored improvisation in their classrooms, with The Second City artists serving as their guides and mentors. The openness of qualitative inquiry allowed us to approach the inherent complexity of social interaction and to do justice to that complexity, to respect it in its own right. As qualitative researchers, we sought to avoid simplifying social phenomena, and instead to explore the range of behavior in the study settings in order to expand our understanding of the resulting interactions. We assumed throughout the research process that social interaction is complex and that we would uncover some of that complexity, and that the tools of the interpretive researcher (Erickson, 1986; Graue & Walsh, 1998) would help us to recognize and make sense of themes that emerged.

#### ***Data Sources***

Over the course of the spring semester of 2005, we logged over one hundred clock hours of observation in the classrooms of the study's participants. Roughly half of that time was spent at Lakeside School, with the rest split between Midtown Elementary and South Primary School (all pseudonyms). We also spent time with the teachers in the context of training workshops, two of which were conducted in the teachers' school buildings and one of which took place at The Second City Training Center. In these workshops, TSCEP trainers engaged the classroom teachers in the improvisation games that they would later use with their own students, debriefing after each activity the theoretical base for using the activity and generating extension ideas for connecting the activity to the teacher's classroom setting. In each of these situations, we took on the role of participant-observers (Adler & Adler, 1998), recording field notes for later coding and analysis whenever we were not on our feet alongside the teachers. Some of those notes were entered directly into word processing files on laptop computers that we brought to the sites; others were taken by hand and later typed up.

Additionally, we conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) with several teachers from each of the schools in order to better understand the project from the teachers' point of view. These interviews were also transcribed into word processing files.

### ***Data Analysis***

In our data analysis, we followed the methodology of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), Carspecken, (1996), and Spradley (1979) by working through several days' sets of field notes and interviews at a time making side notes of words and ideas that appeared frequently throughout the body of text. After reading a set of notes or transcripts, we went back to the notes to code those items that stood out; key themes emerged from these analysis sessions. We were also able to collect some student artifacts, including informal and formal student writing, performance-related scripts and props, and videotapes of student performances. A limitation of this study is that these data were not gathered systematically enough to be useful in the current analysis; future research should seek to rectify that gap.

### ***Sites***

Each of the three sites in which we conducted research are part of the Chicago Public School system, yet each one is a unique and complex physical and social setting. As a result, TSCEP was implemented slightly differently at each site, and although the study's data reveal shared educational impacts among the three schools and at the varying grade levels observed, distinctions are also clear, connected to each site's particular structures and needs. To understand the intersections and distinctions, it is helpful to have in mind a brief description of each school. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used for all names of schools, teachers, and students; actual names of the Second City personnel and researchers are used.

Lakeside Elementary School is a magnet school focused on the arts and technology. It is housed in a massive gray concrete and glass low-rise structure set between high-rise condominiums on Chicago's north side. Originally designed as an "open concept" building, Lakeside's interior is arranged in pods, each of which features 5-7 classrooms clustered around a common space. In addition to the classroom pods and gymnasium, cafeteria, library, and teachers' room, it includes a warehouse-sized area that contains music, art, and technology rooms, a platform stage, and large, open spaces. Displays of current student work cover classroom surfaces; past student work is exhibited in professional looking arrays throughout the corridors. As a magnet school, Lakeside draws students from the neighborhood and is also open to children citywide. Its student body roughly reflects the overall ethnic and linguistic diversity of the city, although the White and Asian/Pacific Islander populations are somewhat overrepresented while the Hispanic population is somewhat underrepresented. According to state report card data, 14.4% of the students are classified as having limited English proficiency, consistent with the figure of 14.0% for the district as a whole. On the other hand, in comparison with other CPS schools, Lakeside has lower poverty, truancy, and mobility rates and a higher attendance rate.

Unlike Lakeside, South Primary School is a neighborhood school that draws its students solely from the immediate community, a public housing development that is the only

residential area within several miles. Surrounded by an industrial area containing automobile factories, garbage dumps, and a polluted river, the self-contained complex includes housing, schools, social service providers, and medical facilities. All of the students in the school speak English as their first language, all are African-American, and the poverty rate reaches nearly 100%. However, inside, South Primary School represents an oasis in the context of poverty that surrounds it. As at Lakeside, exterior doors are locked once the school day begins. Unlike at Lakeside, where a disembodied voice responded through the speaker system and buzzed us into the school when we rang the security doorbell, at South, the Principal responded to the doorbell in person. This personalized touch permeates the culture of the school. The building itself, an archetypical 1930s institutional structure, is impeccably maintained. The hallways are sparkling and well lit, and the bright green and yellow floor tile is polished to a sheen. Student work, hand-lettered motivational expressions, and hand-drawn portrait art mounted in black picture frames decorate the walls.

Midtown Elementary School lies geographically between the other two schools.

Architecturally, Midtown is the oldest of the three schools we observed. Typical of school construction in the post WWI era, its hallways are wide and ceilings high. The hallways are well lit and freshly painted, but the choice of a dark paint color and dark woodwork make them appear drab. Little student work is exhibited on the hallway walls, although within individual classrooms, work is prominently displayed. One's first impression of the school is that of overt security: a large metal detector blocks entry to the school. While visible, this security was without teeth, as there appeared to be little monitoring of the system for either students or adults entering the school. Unlike at South Primary, we never received a meaningful greeting when entering the building. Although Midtown is not as isolated as South Primary, some of its demographics are stunning. With a 95% poverty rate, along with a 64% mobility rate and 89% attendance rate, Midtown is struggling to provide its students with meaningful educational experiences. It is difficult to say whether the high truancy and mobility rates and poor attendance rate are endemic to the mobility of the neighborhood, or to what extent the school climate and culture contribute to these striking statistics.

Teachers from each school participated in a nine-hour training workshop as their initial introduction to The Second City Educational Program. For teachers from Lakeside, that workshop took place at The Second City Training Center. The workshops for the South Primary and Midtown teachers took place in their respective school buildings. Following the workshops, an artist in residence from The Second City worked with the administration of each school to develop a schedule that could accommodate the needs of both the visiting artist and the school community. At Lakeside and South Primary, the TSCEP residency was scheduled as an integral part of the instructional process, and the expressed expectation among the teachers and the school principals was that the program would develop students' literacy based learning. At Midtown, however, the principal specifically scheduled the

residency only after state testing was completed for the year; it was clear that the program was viewed as an add-on, holding similar status as the school carnival. At Lakeside and South Primary, The Second City artist Mary Scruggs worked with the teachers and students during the residency portion of the program; at Midtown, she team-taught the residency work with two Second City colleagues. Different artists conducted the training workshops: one artist conducted all of the training for the Lakeside and Midtown teachers, while a second artist worked with the South Primary teachers. At Lakeside, the TSCEP program was implemented in third-, fifth-, and eighth-grade classrooms. At South Primary, second graders and their teachers engaged in the program, and at Midtown, The Second City artists worked with mainstream primary-level and middle-school classes and one class designated as a cross-categorical special education class for students in grades five through eight.

### **Impact on Students' Literacy Skills Development**

Literacy is often primarily associated with the written word. Literacy is much greater: it can be viewed as anything that creates story (Probst, 1988; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995; Wilhelm, 1997, McKnight, 2000). Developing teaching methods and strategies that catapult students into text so that they can create story is of paramount pedagogical concern for educators who want to build children's literacy skill sets. Establishing a classroom atmosphere that frees all children to engage creatively with language is also key; in fact, evidence suggests that engagement in the affective domain precedes engagement in the cognitive domain (Connell, et al. and Skinner & Belmont, as cited in Avenilla, 2003; Newmann, 1992). Improvisation provides pedagogical strategies that can help to create a positive classroom climate and that can develop students' ability to "see text," enhancing their ability to decipher and comprehend meaning in existing texts as well as to create expressive texts of their own through moving, speaking, and writing (Wilhelm, 1997, McKnight, 2000).

### ***Program Design: Learning through Play***

The design of The Second City Educational Program grows out of the philosophy that learning is best accomplished through play (The Second City Training Center, 2004). Based on the work of the late Viola Spolin (1986, 1999), whose son Paul Sills was The Second City's first artistic director, the theater games that the TSCEP artists used with the teachers and students in this study built from simple focus and concentration activities to more complex activities involving creation and performance of original sketches. In both the teacher workshops and the initial phase of each residency, one of the first moves that the TSCEP artists made was to establish an atmosphere of playfulness. As Diane Ackerman (1999) describes in her book, *Deep Play*, "The world of play favors exuberance, license, abandon. Shenanigans are allowed, strategies are tried, selves can be revised." This is not to suggest that playfulness is without limits, for as Ackerman goes on to say, "Play has its own etiquette, rituals and ceremonies, its own absolute rules" (p. 6).

One of the absolute rules that the TSCEP artists introduced to the teachers and the students was the concept of “*yes, and,*” a notion upon which all subsequent work was based. As Mary Scruggs told a group of fifth-graders at Lakeside, “*Yes, and* is the idea that we take what another person suggests and build on it. Like, *yes*, I accept your idea, *and* here’s what I’m going to do with it” (Field notes, 2/4/05). For at least some of the students, this playful idea seemed to translate directly into other areas of classroom life. An eighth-grade teacher from Lakeside reported that while her students were working on a project unrelated to the Second City workshops, she overheard one of her students say to another, “*Yes, and, remember? Let’s take your idea and add to it...*” (JM, 2/16/05).

The trainers we observed also taught specifically the etiquette of ensemble. For example, Mary stressed to a third-grade class, “An ensemble is a group of people who are working together toward a common goal. Your job as an ensemble member is to make each other look good” (Field notes, 5/16/05). Making each other look good was tied directly to verbal and to nonverbal communication skills, such as those used in the game “Pass the Clap.” In this game, which was used as an introductory lesson with each class, the participants stand in a circle. One player starts the game by making eye contact with the player standing next to him or her, and the two players clap at the same time. The “receiving” player turns to the next person in the circle, they clap simultaneously, and so on. After the group has successfully “passed the clap” around the circle one or more times, the game can be complicated by adding the instruction that the passer may choose to send the clap back in the opposite direction. In each case, the goal is to keep the rhythm going, a feat only accomplished through maintaining good eye contact and concentrating on where the movement is going.

### ***Engaging Students Through Play***

On the surface, it may seem that a game such as “Pass the Clap” has little educational value. On the contrary, such activities engage students while developing their skills in collaboration, negotiation, focus, and attention, all of which are essential to learning. We observed this game in action with a group of fifth- through eighth-grade students who were in a self-contained special education class at Midtown Elementary School (Field notes, 5/31/05). On the day of the observation, the students began the session with Mary and Jason, The Second City trainers, with a ten-minute freewrite. During this time, several students pounded on their desks, making “music” with banging and pencils, and many chattered, not always to anyone else. Their teacher’s admonishment to settle down quelled the music, although the chattering continued. After about ten minutes, Mary and Jason collected the papers, which they gave to the teachers. They divided the students into two separate groups for “Pass the Clap,” with Mary taking one group and Jason the other; the classroom teacher passed from group to group to observe the students, ultimately joining Jason’s group to help the students engage in the activity.



It was clear from their frowning facial expressions and tensed shoulders that a number of the students were initially skeptical about participating in the game, and it took several repetitions of the directions for the groups to begin to experience success. One boy, a seventh-grader whom we will call Alexander, had such difficulty with the physical act of clapping that the teacher took his hands and helped him while repeating the directions. After a few turns, however, Alexander successfully “passed the clap,” and he began to smile and seemed to relax. From that point on, he focused on his classmates and continued to smile. As the game continued, eye contact among all of the students increased, and the tension in the room dissipated. Mary and Jason merged the two groups into one, and they, the classroom teacher, and the students successfully played several rounds of the game. The lack of focus and attention so evident at the beginning of the observation period shifted completely as the group collaborated on the activity. In a later interview, the classroom teacher shared that such cooperation had previously been rare with this group of students, but that as a result of the improvisation work, he had “been able to get them to work as a group” and then to “use their imagination” (JY 6/10/05) more effectively than they had prior to the residency. We believe that the expectation that all students would be supported in playing in every activity was key in fostering growth, both in individual students’ engagement and in the groups’ ability to work collaboratively.

The kind of collaboration fostered by the improvisation games we observed, along with increased student engagement, made it possible for some students who had special learning needs to participate more fully and take on more positive roles in their classrooms. For example, we observed a youngster with autism whom we will call Penny. Penny was a student at Lakeside who was mainstreamed into a third-grade class. Initially, her teacher and her full-time inclusion aide had hesitated to have Penny participate in The Second City residency, fearing that her typical resistance to classroom work and ineffective oral communication would not only preclude her gaining much from the activities but would also interfere with her classmates’ experiences. What they and the TSCEP trainer found was that Penny became engaged and attentive during the initial activities, whose focus required little language production. Given the expectation that all group members are part of the ensemble and with Mary’s modeling, her classmates made sure she was included in the ensemble work. When the class ultimately performed scenes related to their study of space exploration, Penny had a non-speaking role that allowed her to pantomime her part of the story. Thus, Penny was able to draw on her strength—movement—and compensate for her limited oral expression, in order to participate in the literacy event of the scene performance. Penny’s classroom aide commented that she was “really amazed that Penny did so well with this work” (MC, 5/20/05), noting that the engagement and attention that Penny showed during the TSCEP sessions often carried over into her other classes once the day’s improvisation work was finished. Penny’s involvement parallels that of youngsters with visual impairments described

by Edmiston (2007), whose involvement in drama activities drew upon their strengths to position them as competent members of the classroom and broader community.

### ***Children Entering Texts to Create Story***

Students with special learning needs are not the only ones who may benefit from the use of improvisation activities. Although the limitations of our data collection preclude our claiming that the improvisation activities that we observed impacted the young people's test scores, the qualitative data make clear that these activities helped all the students—many of whom were reluctant readers and writers—to enter texts, to respond, and to create, and to evoke and exert control over the ideas, sensations, characters, and meanings that they were experiencing in their required schoolwork. Louise Rosenblatt, a foundational theorist for reader response theory, discussed the connections between reading and creative activity. Rosenblatt asserted, “the benefits of literature can emerge only from creative activity on the part of the reader himself” (1978, p. 276). Like improvisation, where the actor must create meaning through exploration, reading demands involvement and participation in the text. The connections between reader response and improvisation are a critical component in the examination of literacy and The Second City Educational Program.

Rosenblatt (1978) describes the connection between reading (specifically literature) and drama as follows:

We accept the fact that the actor infuses his own voice, his own body, his own gestures-in short, his own interpretation-into the words of the text. Is he not carrying to its ultimate manifestations what each of us as readers of text must do? (p.13)

Are we, as readers, dissimilar to actors? Like actors, if we are engaged readers, then we are allowing ourselves to participate in the imaginary text worlds. Reading literature, according to Rosenblatt (1995), is the reader's participation in a “transaction” with text that produces meaning.

Britton (1970) describes the act of reading as the creation of “secondary worlds” and the involvement and enactment of drama within these text worlds. If readers are placed into a secondary world through improvisation, then they are experiencing the text world as full participants and reacting to it from within, rather than acting as mere spectators. Such participation can also help connect reading and writing, enabling readers to create new texts based on what they have read. Our data add to the body of work that emphasizes the power of creative dramatics to enhance students' literacies, including work by Brinda (2008), Dowdy and Campbell (2008), Hanna (1994), and Wilhelm (2002). As we took field notes

during this study, we observed students engaging in these secondary worlds and using them to create new texts on several occasions.

For example, one set of students with whom Mary Scruggs worked included a group of energetic and kinetic boys who called themselves the Eagles group. These young men did not walk from place to place: they skipped, hopped, cartwheeled, and spun. During a unit of study of Native American culture, Mary worked with the students on developing scenes based on an improvisational model of *Situation-Problem-Solution*. While the Eagles were working on their scene, one of the boys began to run on hands and feet, looking just like an animal on all fours, while the other boys chased him. Mary stopped the boys, saying, "Hey, let me see that again." The boys performed a brief enactment of hunting the animal; they told Mary that it had come from the Native American stories that they had been reading.

Mary stopped and thought about all that they had revealed. She decided to seat the boys in a circle, and once she had their complete focus, she asked, "What is your scene about; what's going on here?" The boys explained quite simply that they were hunters and were chasing an animal. "Where's the animal?" Mary queried. The boys looked at each other and pointed to Darnell, who smiled broadly. The boys decided that the animal in the scene was a fox. Mary prompted the students to do the scene again. Before the students performed, Mary pulled Darnell aside and asked him if he could make us believe that he was a fox. Darnell smiled and declared, "No problem." His four-legged physicalization of the fox brought cheers from his classmates (Field notes, 2/7/05).

Over the next few sessions, the boys developed a complete story about a magical fox they named Chico. The Native American hunters sought to kill or capture Chico, but the fox escaped and transformed into a double-sized being who escapes the hunters. The boys decided, in response to Mary's prompting, that the moral of the story was "never be jealous of an animal's power." The students rehearsed repeatedly over the course of several days, refining the sketch based on a feedback loop in which they and their classmates in different groups performed their sketches for one another, and then the observers shared "What I liked" and "What I didn't understand" (Field notes, 2/7/05). Eventually, Mary videotaped their fables. Once the taping was complete, the student actors were eager to view the performance. The Eagles group members were rapt as they watched their video, and then they decided that they wanted to make some additional improvements and tape their fable again (Field notes, 2/16/05).

In this case, the students developed an original text and a secondary world that allowed them ample opportunity to practice and develop the literacy skills of speaking, listening, comprehension, visualization, representation, sequencing, synthesis of information, elaboration, understanding of literary genre, and elements of story. Their story showed

intertextual connections to what they had read and researched about Native Americans, as well as to story elements from traditional and popular culture, evidencing their growing understanding of the classroom study they had been doing. As well, it was a new creation, one that took time to develop. A challenge that teachers often face in teaching the composition process is sustaining students' willingness to revise and reshape their writing. This situation was initially no different. As Mary commented later to us, "It's like making a birthday cake. You've got to have messes before the cake is ready. They wanted the cake on the second day, and all they could see was the mess" (MS, 8/8/05). The fun the students were having with the physical activity enabled them to get through the "mess" in order to engage fully in the task of rehearsing and refining their sketch. The feedback they received kept them on a track that sustained their focus on communicating the point of the story. All of this added up to a rich literacy experience for these boys and for their classmates.

When we debriefed with the fifth grade teachers at Lakeside, they indicated that the TSCEP program had helped their students make personal connections with literacy. Matthew, a second-year teacher, explained, "My students are more readily making connections between writing, schoolwork, and stories. The students don't automatically make these kinds of connections, but the improv activities seem to jumpstart that" (MM, 5/19/05). His colleague Martha added that the students' successes in the improvisation work seemed to motivate them to be more willing to participate in school activities. Martha elaborated, "A lot of the kids were able to shine in a way that they weren't before. Some of these kids have real potential as writers, and I think that many of them see that in themselves now" (MB, 5/19/05). The second grade teachers at South Primary reported that their students made the same types of connections. As South Primary teacher Janet stated, "I think [the improv activities] enhance their writing because [it gets them to] visualize and ask, "What am I seeing? What am I writing?" (JM 4/29/05).

### **Impact on Teachers and Pedagogy**

For improvisation techniques to be successfully used in classrooms, teachers must learn and become comfortable with them. The following tenets are central to the TSCEP program's model of professional development. First, educators who are going to use improvisation strategies in their classrooms should experience the activities themselves that they will later teach their students, discuss the philosophical underpinnings of the types of activities they learn, and spend time considering ways to integrate the activities into their own curriculum. Second, they should work alongside an artist-in-residence to implement the strategies in their classrooms and only then should they be left alone to incorporate those strategies into their ongoing practice. In its ideal, this model of professional development is consistent with many of the National Staff Development Council's Standards (National Staff Development Council, 2001), in that it creates a learning community for the teachers as they participate in

the initial workshops, as well as a system of support as they implement the strategies in their classrooms.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the lived experiences of some of the teachers in this study deviated in a number of ways from the ideal, and that the observational data showed wide variation in the teachers' level of participation in the workshop settings as well as during the residencies. Still, in interviews, every teacher who participated in the TSCEP program reported that their participation made a significant positive impact on the way they approach their students and their teaching. The apparent disconnect between teachers' engagement with new practices and teachers' reporting of their attitudes toward the practices is not unusual in professional development activities (Goodson, 1992; Lytle & Fecho, 1991); there appears to be a gap between the introduction of new ideas to teachers and the application of those ideas in the classroom. This gap may be a natural function of cognitive rehearsal, allowing the participant to internalize new information prior to actual implementation (Vygotsky, 1978). It may also be related to contextual factors, such as school climate and culture, administrative style in the school, grade level, teacher attitude and experience, and external pressures including assessment and high-stakes testing.

For instance, one teacher who was very enthusiastic during training and the residency portions of the program stated that initially, she found that she could "quickly and easily integrate [improvisational strategies] into reading and literature" but that after the residency ended, she did less "because of planning time" (FB, 4/15/05). It seemed that for her, as for some of the other teachers, thinking independently about how to incorporate new strategies, when she already had other lesson structures in place, required too much time in an overcrowded daily schedule. Another teacher who expressed great satisfaction with what he saw his students doing with The Second City artists shared that he was loathe to continue with the same types of activities on his own, citing a perceived responsibility to his students for content coverage in order to help them perform well on the state standardized exams as his major impediment (BS, 4/15/05). The perception that using drama activities as part of a literacy development repertoire may impede young people's success on standardized tests—and the accompanying assumption that standardized tests are the only measure of success—seems particularly lamentable, given the many benefits that we observed students enjoying.

### **Conclusion**

The types of improvisational drama activities that we observed during our study of The Second City Educational Program's workshop and residency periods in three Chicago public elementary schools were highly engaging and interactive and aligned closely with the NCTE/IRA Language Arts Standards and the Illinois Goals for Learning. When young people are actively engaged in interpreting existing texts and creating new ones, built from their prior experiences and from their very fertile imaginations, and in sharing those texts

orally, through movement, and through the written word, their literacy skills can only be enhanced. The democratization of the classroom that the underlying principals of improvisation support can enhance classroom community, making possible an atmosphere in which creative risk-taking is the norm rather than the exception and where all students are truly included. Furthermore, in its ideal, the kind of partnership between classroom teachers and visiting artists that the TSCEP program strives for can create a vital link for teachers who have no other theatrical training.

Of course, not every school has access to The Second City Educational Program or to other artist-in-residence programs like it. Even in the schools that were part of this study, not every classroom teacher was able or willing to participate in the program, and implementation by those teachers who did participate showed great variation. Nonetheless, resources are available for teachers who wish to learn improvisation and other drama strategies on their own (e.g., Johnstone, 1999; Rowe, 1994; Spolin, 1986; 1999; Wilhelm, 2002). The challenges to overcome if such active, engaging, and—yes, fun—strategies are to find their place in literacy pedagogy seem more related to context than to their potential benefits for learners. For at least some of the teachers involved in this study, their habitual practices, the time demands of daily classroom life, and the pressures of standardized testing seem to have interfered with their integration of the strategies they learned into their curricular planning. We believe this is unfortunate, and that improvisation is a valuable tool for the development of young people’s literacies.

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### **About the Authors**

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## Appendix

### *Improvisation Games/Language Arts Standards Alignment*

This table shows specific Language Arts Standards associated with different improvisation games that are part of The Second City Training Center’s Educational Program workshops, and that we observed in the training sessions and/or in the classroom residencies. Although the TSCEP workshops focus on oral language, classroom teachers can—and in many cases that we observed, did—extend many of the activities to include a written component. All games are described fully in *Theater Games for the Classroom* (Spolin, 1999) or in *Improvisation for Creative Pedagogy: Resource Guide* (The Second City Training Center, 2004).

Improvisation Games	NCTE/IRA Standards	Illinois State Goals
Zip-Zap-Zop Pass the Clap Mirrored Pairs Bippety, bippety, bop	4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.	4.A.1a: Listen attentively by facing the speaker, making eye contact and paraphrasing what is said. 4.B.3d: Use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to maintain communications and to resolve conflict.
Space Walk	3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw upon their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).	4.B.3d: Use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to maintain communications and to resolve conflict.
Parts of a whole	4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.	3.B.2c: Expand ideas by using modifiers, subordination, and standard paragraph organization.

<b>Improvisation Games</b>	<b>NCTE/IRA Standards</b>	<b>Illinois State Goals</b>
<p>One Word Story</p> <p>Dr. Know-It-All</p>	<p>4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.</p> <p>5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for variety of purposes.</p> <p>6: Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.</p>	<p>1.C.2b: Make and support inferences and form interpretations about main themes and topics.</p> <p>3.B.3b: Establish central idea, organization, elaboration and unity in relation to purpose and audience.</p> <p>4.B.3d: Use verbal and nonverbal communication strategies to maintain communications and to resolve conflict.</p> <p>5.C.2a: Create a variety of print and nonprint documents to communicate acquired information for specific audiences and purposes.</p>
<p>Situation / Problem / Solution</p> <p>Beginning / Middle / End</p> <p>String of Pearls</p>	<p>4: Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.</p> <p>5: Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for variety of purposes.</p> <p>6: Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.</p>	<p>3.B.2b: Establish central idea, organization, elaboration and unity in relation to purpose and audience.</p> <p>3.B.2c: Expand ideas by using modifiers, subordination, and standard paragraph organization.</p>

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