

Telling New Stories: Reframing Writing Centers as Cultural Communities

Literacy Improvisation Activities

We approach literacy-improvisation based on Tina Fey's four rules of improv:

1. Agree,
2. Don't just say yes. Say yes and,
3. Make statements, and
4. There are no mistakes... Only opportunities.

Fey's rules offer individuals actions -- respecting, contributing, creating, and adapting -- that in a writing center context work to contribute to rather than limit consultants.

What It Is Not

In this improvisation activity, the ensemble works individually to re-imagine how the body works to extend language and to construct the everyday world.

- The ensemble gathers in a circle.
- The group begins by seeing how the body is connected to the world through language by pointing to things in the room and saying what they are.
- After the group has done this kind of pointing, they begin the process of problematizing body/language connection by pointing to one thing while saying what the prior thing is.
- For the last pointing activity, the ensemble points to an object and says something that it is not.

Shake Down

In this improvisation activity, the ensemble works together to create shared energy and rejuvenation through collective movement. We embody movement together, creating and feeding off of each other's growing energy.

- Form a circle
- Group counts to seven, slowly, shaking right hand
- Repeat, shaking left hand, then right foot, then left foot.
- Group counts to six four times using same movements
- Continue, counting to five, then four, then three, two, one, increasing speed and movement with each set.

What are you doing?

In this improvisation activity, the ensemble explores the mismatch between words and actions. The ensemble takes turns leading and following. The words work in conjunction with actions uniting the ensemble—resulting in unique scenes within the collaborative space.

- Everyone starts by standing in a circle.
- One member of the ensemble goes first and stands in the middle of the circle, silently miming an activity, such as juggling.

- Another member of the ensemble approaches the person in the middle and asks, “What are you doing?”
- The first person then saying something s/he is NOT doing, such as walking a dog.
- The second person then begins miming the activity the first said s/he was doing.
- The first person exits the circle and a third person approaches, asking, “What are you doing?” as before.
- Each time the person says something s/he isn't doing, which the next person must then do.
- Before sitting down, take some time to reflect on how it felt to be in the circle and/or answering the question, “What are you doing?”

So what? How does this activity connect with the work we do in the WC and its embodiment? There is power in naming and this improvisation brings this notion to light. Think about what it means to work in your writing center. How does the embodiment of that work mesh (or not) with what it means in another center? How does the embodiment of “doing writing center work” in your WC mesh (or not) with the version your administrator holds you accountable for? What is gained/lost by accepting/challenging multiple embodiments of writing center work?

Count Up

In this improvisation activity participants count from 1-20 as a group, with only one person speaking at a time, and without communicating among the group. Group members must feel the connection, instinctively knowing when it is the right time for them to say a number. It is a challenging task that often requires multiple restarts before completing successfully. This activity builds a sense of community through drawing upon the invisible energy present to overcome a challenge collectively.

- Participants stand in a close circle, touching shoulder to shoulder, eyes closed.
- One person begins by saying “1.” Someone else says “2,” another “3,” and so on.
- If two people say a number simultaneously, the group starts back at 1.
- The group is successful when they are able to reach 20.

Tableaux

In this improvisation, the ensemble creates a shared portrait of a word or situation. The group embodies their various definitions of the word/situation, bringing together their shared and disparate socio-cultural histories in order to create a complexly rendered representation of the concept.

- Free write (if needed) about the word/concept/situation in order to get ideas out on paper and flowing.
- Each member of the ensemble poses in a way that represents the word or concept in his/her view.
- Members of the ensemble arrange themselves, in their poses, with each other, linking their “definitions” in ways that illustrate their connections/ disconnections.

Ranting Circle

In this improvisation activity, the ensemble constructs a collaborative text where the group's energy is used to figure out the issues confronted by the ensemble. In this activity, the lone speaker composes her oral text, consolidating energy, which is then redirected when another ensemble member takes over the composition. In this activity, the words themselves pull the ensemble into the collaborative space rather than eye and body energy circulating among the ensemble.

- Free write on topic or from text to get thoughts flowing.
- Participants come into a standing circle.
- As everyone is ready to start, turn to face the wall.
- The first person turns to the middle of the circle (to everyone's backs) and rants off the top of his/her head (or notes to get started if needed.)
- That person continues talking/ranting until someone else interrupts. The first person turns back around. Interrupting is good.
- Before sitting down, take some time to reflect on how it felt to be in the ranting circle.

How Do You Embody a Word?

To focus a group in on the multiplicity of understandings, definitions, and perceptions around an idea, have each person in the group select a word to represent the current essence of their understanding or the current facet they would like to bring forward. You could begin with some free writing or listing to get things started.

- Go around the circle, each person saying her word aloud.
- Ask everyone to stand up. Everyone shout your word.
- Everyone create a still image of your word.
- Everyone create a moving image of your word.
- Everyone create a moving image of your word with someone else's moving image of their word.

This move from words to movements, from individual to collective, can draw attention to the messiness of ideas, the flow and sociality of understandings.

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Community Circle Toss

Community is a pretty mushy idea, sort of hard to define both precisely and inclusively. This improv activity tries not to define community, but rather to embody the multiplicitious, moving, fluid nature of social belonging. The activity riffs from the [Urban Bush Women](#).

In this activity, we toss a ball around the circle and share a small aspect of our lives with each catch. The game moves swiftly, the answers short but multiple. For instance, we might start with "Community I Belong To." As the ball comes to you, you name one community you belong to and toss the ball to someone else. The tossing continues, with people in the circle having multiple turns to name communities. Communities named might be very specific, "Newell Elementary Teaching Community," or broad, "early childhood teachers community."

Another round might riff on the first by naming “Communities I am Entering or Want to Enter.” A slower paced version of this improv might use a ball of yarn to show tactically the connections.

Asset Mapping

In this improv we will come together to share about our connections and differences. Moving from space to space, from group to group, we will embody the fluid, moving, multiplicitous nature of difference. We will try to make visible the interesting and sometimes difficult boundaries that both create us and are creating by us in history with other community members. The activity riffs from the [Urban Bush Women](#).

1. Name four corners of a space you are working in. Give each corner a category, i.e. only child, middle child, oldest child, youngest child.
2. Categories need to be such that everyone in the room would be able to choose one. Sometimes including an “other” category can help.
3. Have the group spread out among the four corners based on how they want to identify themselves. It is important the participants self-select their area.
4. Once in the category groups, each group discusses to find common ground. Based on your intentions for the activity, the discussion could work in different ways, i.e. what is one thing that is challenging and one thing that is useful about being in this group.
5. Have each group share out their common ground.
6. Name another set of four categories, one for each corner, and invite people to move to the corner they best identify with in that moment.

Category Ideas

- only, middle, youngest, oldest child
- grew up in urban, rural, suburban, other
- teacher at elementary, middle, high school, college
- always wanted to be a teacher, decided in college to become a teacher, decided later in life to become a teacher, I don't know how I got here
- identifying at this moment most as a teacher, student, researcher, other
- Identifying self most right now as a writer, reader, teacher, other

Adaptations

- You can use a discussion question for each rotation to facilitate thinking around particular ideas or content.
- You can choose categories to facilitate thinking around particular ideas or content.

Mirror Games: Flowing Small Movements

Improv 1: Stand in a circle hands by side. Everyone's job is to pay attention to everyone else and follow any small movements someone else makes without making any big jerky moves yourself.

Improv 2: Stand in a circle hands by side. Send one person out of the area, while someone else self-selects to be the leader. The returning person stands in the middle and tries to discern who the leader is. When the leader makes any movement everyone else does the same. The goal of the circle is to follow the leader without letting on who the leader is.

In these variations, movements are passed subtly around and about the circle, and it is hard to know where they start. This could make visible the ways that mythical thinking or common sense thinking circulates. At one time these activities make ways to embody the everyday circulation of ideas through unknown or uncommented currents and also to expose the unseen "they"s that seem to control ideas. A counter way of seeing the passing of movements and especially the changing, fluidity and swift flow of ideas, or here movements, is to connect this to an embodiment of a public movement that joins together with a common voice and common action in many distinct and individual forms.

Movement Conversations: Seven Poses

In this improv, we will really focus on our bodies to show and feel the way conversation is built between people. Mikhail Bakhtin says that it is through responses to our utterances that our identities are formed. This improv both draws on and challenges Bakhtin by making visible the idea of response and through this embodiment demanding attention to the bodies which ground language and ideas in particular historical moments. This activity riffs from the [Urban Bush Women](#). This improv requires a risk in making our bodies a more primary asset in our engagements. There is no talking as this improv takes place. It might help to have two people model and/or to try this improv after the ensemble has had time together.

1. Everyone will need one partner for this activity. Partners will have a conversation through movement only.
2. Partners should decide who will "speak" first.
3. The facilitator will call very slowly the numbers one through seven.
4. As "one" is called, the first person's will create and hold a still image with her body. She can express any idea she would like with her movement. Her primary audience is her partner.
5. On "two," the second person answers the first with a movement in response.
6. On "three," the first person moves out of her original pose into a new pose in response to her partner.
7. This continue through "seven." On "seven," the final pose is created and held shortly as others in the room are asked to take a look around them for the first time.

Adaptations: Try a different number of poses. Have a conversation about a specific idea, determined beforehand.

Other Border-Crossing Strategies/Activities

Gender Bread

The Genderbread Person, developed by Sam Killermann, requires participants to explore the differences between gender expression, gender identity, biological sex, and attraction/sexuality, by asking them to draw visual representations or write words that describe the different components of their identity.

For the specific activity, visit this site:

<http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/the-genderbread-person-v2-0/>

For a critique of the activity and Killermann:

<https://storify.com/cisnormativity/the-genderbread-plagiarist>

Privilege Clips

Privilege Clips invites participants to consider their various aspects of privilege within their nationality, sexuality, religion, class, race, ability, and gender/sex, and then illustrate it by putting their gathered clips together to create a wearable piece.

From Brenda J. Allen, <http://differencematters.info> (directions and downloads available at the site). Based on an exercise by: Gerakina Arlene Sgoutas and colleagues, Metropolitan State College; Denver, CO.

Following the exercise, possible reflections questions include:

- What was it like in this activity to reflect on privilege, rather than on oppression as is the focus in other diversity activities (like those around this room)? Was it a new experience? Comfortable? Enlightening? How did it feel?
- Why is it important for us to be aware of this aspect of our identities/experiences? Why don't we (have to) attend to it on regular basis?
- What does it mean for us to have multiple, intersecting identities – where we experience some privileges (around some identities) AND some oppression (around others)? What insight can this give us in connecting with others? Being patient/generous with them and ourselves? With holding ourselves and others responsible for our actions?
- What identities (systems of privilege) were not represented here today? If we had them, how would that affect your “bling”/creation?
- We asked you to turn your clips into something wearable. What would it mean for you to wear this noticeably for the rest of the day? What messages could others take from your “bling”? How noticeable, to us and others, are our privileges on a daily basis?
- What does the collective privilege present here (all our “bling”) mean for us as individual leaders? In collaboration at our own campuses? Across campuses/communities?

Graffiti Tunnel

Using a hallway or available room, cover the walls with poster boards or giant sticky notes and invite participants to write or draw their own “graffiti” around a central question. By adding

their own 'tag' and reading those of others, participants can gain insights and perspectives related to the question. After the experience, debrief with participants to discuss their experience of tagging, responses to others' tags, and

When used at the Southeastern Writing Center Association conference at East Carolina University in February 2014, the prompt stated, "Tag our walls with your own comments, images, questions, and ideas about oppression -- experiences of it, systems of it, ways of overcoming it -- in the writing center."

This activity is a modified version of the Tunnel of Oppression that has been used at several colleges and universities as a way of learning about diversity, culture, etc. For more information about this activity, please see examples from several institutions:

- http://www.scu.edu/csl/leadership_programs/tunnel.cfm
- <http://mss.boisestate.edu/tunnel-of-oppression/>
- <http://oied.ncsu.edu/MSA/tunnel-of-oppression-2015/>
- http://www.miami.edu/sa/index.php/service_and_leadership_center/programming_boards/tunnel_of_oppression/
- <https://oma.ku.edu/tunnel-oppression>
- http://www.technicianonline.com/news/article_7892945c-acf8-11e4-9813-0b02b9a74490.html

Language Dice

Create paper dice and have consultants record phrases or words that may be used in everyday conversation (or in the writing center) that perpetuate oppression (e.g. "That's gay" or "That's retarded"). In small groups, consultants roll the die and then discuss the phrase that is revealed:

- Where have you seen/heard this being used?
- How does this phrase impact our work in the writing center?
- How can we counteract this language and the meaning behind it.

For an easy dice template, please visit

http://www.firstpalette.com/Craft_themes/Alphabet_and_Numbers/paperdice/paperdice.html

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