# Using Improv for Student Engagement and Learning

Israa Thiab (SCB)
Thursday, May 15 | 11:00-11:50AM | Wallace Library, Room 3420

## Welcome! Please take a seat.

# Agenda

- Overview: Definitions and benefits of improv in education
- Activity 1: “Yes, and…” game (idea-building)
- Activity 2: One-Word Story (collaborative storytelling)
- Activity 3: Quick Response (“Don’t Think” warm-up)
- Implementation Tips: Best practices and class-size notes
- Reflection: Discussion and ideas for your courses

# What is improv?

- Unscripted, spontaneous performance: Create scenes or stories on the spot
- Core principle – “Yes, and…”: Always accept your partner’s idea and add to it
- Skills involved: Active listening, adaptability, creativity, teamwork
- Mindset: Embrace mistakes and take risks; it’s about process, not perfection

# Why Improv in STEM?

| |
|---|
| Boosts creativity and critical thinking – think on your feet |
| Enhances communication & teamwork – students practice listening and responding |
| Builds collaboration, empathy, trust – everyone's ideas are valued |
| Encourages risk-taking in a safe environment |
| Active learning: Engages students and even "bolsters academics" when tied to content |

# Setting the Stage (Classroom Culture)

- **No-judgment zone:** Emphasize that all contributions are welcome and respected
- **Teacher models participation:** Facilitator should play too (shows vulnerability)
- **Positive “Yes, and” mindset:** Encourage building on ideas rather than correcting or saying “no”
- **Clear safety:** Explain ground rules (e.g., no embarrassing personal disclosures, keep it fun and appropriate)
- **Start small:** Use a warm-up game or icebreaker to build comfort

# Activity 1 – “Yes, and…” Game

**Purpose**: Builds on others’ ideas; fosters listening and creativity

**Instructions**:

- Stand in a circle.
- One person starts a story with a sentence. The next person says “Yes, and…” to add the next sentence.
- Keep going around the circle.
- To make it fun start with an absurd statement, you can play it a second round with a topic relevant to your course

**Props:** None required.

**Group size:** Works with any class size (unless it is one student)

# Activity 2 – One-Word Story

- **Purpose**: Fosters teamwork, narrative thinking, and attention to detail

**Instructions**:

1. Everyone in a circle (or multiple circles if class is large)
2. Choose a theme or title for the story (e.g., “Exploring Mars” or “Innovating the water filter”).
3. One person starts with a single word to begin the story.
4. Going around the circle, each person adds one word to continue the story.
5. Build complete sentences; one person’s word combines with neighbors’ to form sentences.
6. Continue until a natural ending or after one full round.

**Props:** None needed.

**Group size:** Ideal for any size (break into sub-groups of ~6–8 if class is large).

# Activity 3 – Quick Response Warm-Up (“Don’t Think”)

**Purpose:** Trains fast, instinctive thinking; lowers fear of being wrong

**Instructions:**

1. Give each person one blank index card and a pen.
2. Each participant write an open-ended (STEM-related) prompt or fill-in-the-blank on their card. Collect cards: Fold them and put all cards into a hat or container.
3. Rapid rounds: Everyone stands in a circle. Pass the container around; each person draws one card and immediately answers it aloud.
4. Time challenge (optional): Time the round (e.g., 30 seconds) and challenge the group to answer faster next time. Do 2–3 rounds.

**Props:** Index cards, container (hat or bowl), optional timer/phone.

**Group size:** Good for any size; works individually but can be done seated or standing in a circle.

# Implementation Tips

- Start Small: Use short improv warm-ups before or after lectures (1–5 minutes).
- Tailor to Content: Use STEM themes or problems (e.g., one-word story about an experiment, “Yes, and” building a science concept).
- Volunteer Basis: Especially at first, let students opt in or volunteer for activities (avoid calling on shy students without warning).
- Debrief: After each game, discuss what happened and connect it to learning (e.g., how did “Yes, and” mirror good peer brainstorming?).
- Logistics: Ensure enough space for any movement; consider classroom layout (circles work best).
- Be Flexible: Not every idea will work immediately—experiment and adapt games as needed.

# Reflection & Discussion

- Share your impressions: What surprised you about the activities? Which skills did you notice?
- Classroom applications: How could you adapt these games for a STEM lecture, lab, or seminar?
- Challenges/Questions: Identify any concerns (time, class size, student reactions) and brainstorm solutions.
- Next steps: Commit to trying one improv activity in your course; suggest resources (e.g., readings, workshops).

Q&A