**Improvisation Unit by Allison Rex**

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| **Objective:** | Students will demonstrate their understanding of the rules of improv by participating in an improv performance/competition. |
| **Class Level:** | Intermediate |
| **Main Concepts:** | rules of improvisation, character development, scene creation, improv games, obstacles |
| **1994 National Standards:** |  **CONTENT STANDARD 2:** Acting by developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in improvisations and informal or formal productions.  |
| **Description:** | Students learn the rules and guidelines for improv as well as several performance type improv games.  Unit culminates in a "Comedy Sportz" type game. |

**Lesson Plans**

Lesson 1: **Intro to Improvisation**

Students will apply their understanding of the basics of improvisation by identifying improv skills in a film and defining guidelines.

Lesson 2: **Show, Don’t Tell**

Students will apply their understanding of showing in improv by participating in “Party Quirks” and reflecting on their experience.

Lesson 3: **Creating Character**

Students will apply their understanding of character by creating a list of standards of characters and reflecting on their experience.

Lesson 4: **Scene Disaster!**

Students will apply their knowledge of improvisation in a performance setting by performing a scene with obstacles.

Lesson 5: **Rules Reviewed**

Students will interpret and apply the 8 guidelines of improv by creating a 2 minute skit and game that demonstrates the guidelines given.

Lesson 6: **Performances**

Students will demonstrate their understanding of the rules of improv by participating in a final improv performance/competition.

**Author's Notes:**

 This daily rubric may be used throughout the unit to grade specific improvs:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Rubric** | **5 points** | **0 points** |
| **Participation** | Student is actively involved in the class and is thoughtful in their reflection | Student barely participates and merely goes through the motions. |

**1: Intro to Improvisation**

**Objective**

Students will apply their understanding of the basics of improvisation by identifying improv skills in a film and defining guidelines.

**Materials Needed**

computer and projector to show the following youtube clip:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__WFzmxZUCM&feature=related>

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

(7 minutes):  Ask the students to stand up and find their own spot in the room. Ask the students to begin walking around the room, silently. Encourage them to just walk, don’t think about doing anything, just walk. Then after a minute, ask the students to then begin walking around the room like a penguin. Let the students know that they don’t necessarily have to walk exactly like a penguin- they can walk in a way that shows the qualities of a penguin if they would like. Then continue with these prompts- cat, monkey, snake, a mosquito, a general, an old person, a giant, a toddler. Encourage the students to follow their impulses and instincts- Don’t think too much about it. Ask the students to come back together in a circle.

**Instruction**

Step 1 (3 minutes): Ask the students to think to themselves and evaluate what they have just done. Ask them to think about this question: “Did you follow your instincts?” After a moment, ask the students to respond as a group to the question, “Was it difficult to follow your instincts? Why or Why not?” Encourage the students to share their answers with the class. Ask the students, “What does following your instincts or impulses have to do with improv?”

Step 2 (5 minutes): Ask the students to give you a definition of improv. Write this on the board. Explain to the students that we will be exploring and practicing improv over the coming class periods. Inform the students that over this unit, it is important that we be sure to remember to have respect for everyone in the class and what they do. Explain that improv comes naturally to some people and for others, it is more difficult. We are all learning together and if there is an atmosphere of trust, we can follow our impulses and learn that much more about improv. Ask the students, “What can we do as a class to be sure that we are respectful of others, helping everyone feel safe?” Write these on the board.

Step 3(10 minutes): Explain that although improvisation is off the top of your head and not planned or rehearsed, there are still guidelines that we follow that help us focus our thoughts and impulses. Explain to the students that we are going to watch a clip of a group doing improv. Ask the students to pay attention to the strengths of the improv as you watch the clip. Show the clip of *Whose Line is it Anyway?*    After the clip, ask the students, “What strengths did you notice?” “Why do you think they were so successful with their improv?” “What made it interesting to watch?” “What did you notice about their bodies, commitment, pantomime skills, creativity?”
Give the students time to respond and discuss.

Step 4(1 minute): Explain that while improv is fun, it is more than just playing games. It takes a great amount of skill to be able to think quickly on the spot. Emphasize that the skills they will be learning will carry over into the work they do in plays and scenes.

Step 5(15 minutes): Go through the guidelines as listed below one at a time with the class, discussing the meaning and reason behind each. After, ask for two volunteers who would be willing to demonstrate what we shouldn’t do when improving. If there is time, you may have multiple improvs, each doing one thing from the list.  Let the students perform their improv. Some situations could be coming home from a date, at the grocery check-out counter, argument with parents about extending curfew, asking a girl/guy to a dance, etc. After each improv, ask the students, “Why didn’t the scene work?” “What affect did it have on the actors?”

**DO:**

1. Commitment 100%

2. Listen to the other players

3. Support your team members

4. Forward the Action

**AVOID:**

1. Denial

2. Telling rather than showing

3. Forcing funniness

4. Worry about making mistakes

Step 6 (2 minutes): After the improvisations have performed, ask the students, “Why is it important to follow these guidelines?” “How will these guidelines help you as an actor?”

Step 7 (17 minutes): Explain to the students that this will be their improv team for the unit. Tell the students that their assignment is to come up with a creative team name for their group. Then, they must create cheers for one another, as people from their team will be called on to do certain activities and that is how they will show their support for their team members. Give the students 15 minutes to do this.

Step 8 (5 minutes): Bring the team back together and have each team share their individual cheers.

Step 9 (16 minutes):   Explain to the students that we are now going to do a small activity that will prepare us for our improv adventure. Ask the students to sit in a circle. Explain to the students that we are going to all tell a story. One person will begin telling a story, a new, original story and when I say “Next” the person to the right of the starter will pick up where they left off, continuing the story. We will go around the whole circle and there needs to be a clear beginning, middle and end with established characters. Explain that we will play multiple times to practice. Encourage the students to challenge themselves, being creative and pushing themselves. As you continue through the game, set limits, like “You can’t use the word “little” or “and” or every sentence must start with a certain letter, etc. Play until about 2 minutes are left in class.

Step 10 (2 minutes): Explain to the students that we will begin to examine the guidelines of improv more closely as we start our next unit. Explain everyone needs to come ready to not only have fun, but to challenge themselves. Ask the students what they are most excited for over the coming unit.

**Assessment**

Students will identify improv skills and define guidelines for improv as a class.

**2: Show, Don’t Tell**

**Objective**

Students will apply their understanding of showing in improv by participating in “Party Quirks” and reflecting on their experience.

**Materials Needed**

Party Quirks character list:

* Justin Bieber just released from having his appendix removed.
* Window washer that is afraid of heights
* Celebrity who takes any moment to practice their Oscar speech
* Michael Jackson suffering from short term memory loss
* A clown that just got fired from the circus
* Star wars geek with no social skills
* Lady Gaga trying to warn everyone the world is ending
* Lebron James trying to apply for a job at McDonalds
* Johnny Depp getting his drivers’ license picture taken
* Taylor Swift with a multiple personality disorder
* Simon Cowell judging a high school talent contest
* Uptight English teacher obsessed with correcting everyone’s grammar, even if it isn’t wrong
* Over protective mother ready to break up the party if there is any funny business
* Jimmer trying to hide his identity from paparazzi
* Girl at prom who realizes her date left with another girl

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

(10 minutes): Have four volunteers come to the front: one eye-witness and three detectives trying to solve a murder case. The detectives are sent out of the room beyond hearing range. Together the class decides on three things: a place, an occupation of the victim, and a murder weapon. The first detective is called in into the room to interrogate the witness as to the murder, however the eye-witness is mute. The eye-witness, without words, must convey the events of the murder to the first detective. They may do each part one at a time or all at once. When the detective thinks they understand what happened, they say “aha!” Without saying what they think the things are, the next detective is brought in. The first detective now pantomimes what they think the things are (for a harder challenge tell the first detective they cannot use the exact same pantomime as the eye-witness!). The second detective says “aha!” when they think they know the three things and then pantomimes for the third detective. Once the third detective knows all of the three things he shouts “aha!” and tells the story (dramatically) of what occurred for the murder. Play this about 2 or 3 times.

**Instruction**

Step 1(3 minutes): Ask the students, “What was your experience like, communicating without words?” “What made it difficult?” “What could you have done to communicate more clearly?” Ask the students, “How does this activity relate to improv?” “Why is it important to show and not tell?”

Step 2 (2 minutes): Explain to the students that improv is much more interesting when we are able to show the audience the environment we are in or show who we are. Explain that instead of coming onto the stage and saying, “Wow, this beach is amazing!” I could walk in, breathe in the salty air and begin walking in the sand, showing that it is hot or dipping my toes in the cold water. Demonstrate this for the students. Ask the students, “Why is showing better than telling?”

Step 3 (3 minutes): Explain that we are going to explore this idea further. Have the students sit in a circle and explain that you have a gift in this box and that you are going to show them what it is, instead of telling them. Explain that this box has a gift in it for each of them. Give an example of a snorkel mask- instead of saying, “I always wanted a snorkel mask” I could say, “It’s just what I wanted” and then demonstrate using the mask. Demonstrate this for the students.  Then pass the box to the student on your right and continue the activity.

Step 4 (2 minutes): Ask the students, “What were the different gifts we received?” “What was the most difficult part of the activity?” “Could you have done anything different to make your object clearer?” “What are you starting to learn about improv?”

Step 5 (15 minutes): Have the students get into groups of 3 or 4. Explain that as a group they are to come up with a who, where, what. For example, each person in the group will choose a character that would be at a playground in the afternoon. Some characters could include a child playing at the playground, a parent, a person walking their dog, etc. Explain that as a group we will be guessing what the situation and characters are. Explain that they are to pantomime this, without words. Give the students about 2 minutes to decide with their group who their characters will be and where they are and the situation. Then ask for a volunteer group to go first. Let each group perform.

Step 6 (30 minutes): Inform the students that they are now going to play party quirks. In this game, we have a host for a party. Then there will be three guests. The guests will be given identities to perform and the host must guess who the party guests are. Once a guest’s identity has been discovered, they are to leave the party. Play this enough times for every student to participate. See supplements for identities.

Step 7 (5 minutes):  For the last 5 minutes, bring the group back together and ask them to reflect on what they have learned today. Ask, “Why is it important to show and not tell?” “How does this help you in improv?” “How might this help you in a play, scene or monologue?”

·         More time? **Gibberish.** One student leaves the room with two or three others are given a very specific location, action and problem. Actors are only supposed to speak in gibberish. The student who left enters the scene and while also speaking in gibberish gets incorporated into the scene and will eventually guess all that is going on. Encourage the students to show, not tell.

**Assessment**

Students will apply their knowledge of showing in improv by participating in “Party Quirks” and reflecting on their experience.

**3: Creating Character**

**Objective**

Students will apply their understanding of character by creating a list of standards of characters and reflecting on their experience.

**Materials Needed**

butcher paper,

markers,

*Whose Line*clip with computer and projector

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kikS44SRHZw>

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

(3-5 minutes): Grafitti Board- Write up on the board “Character”. Ask the students to come up to the board and write down anything that comes to their mind when they hear the word character. Encourage the students to write multiple things up on the board.

**Instruction**

Step 1 (3 minutes): Go over what the students have written on the board. Ask the students, “What are some things you have to think of when creating a character?” “Why is it important to pay attention to the details?” “How can we pay attention to those details in improv where you have less time to prepare?”

Step 2 (10 minutes): Show the *Whose Line is it Anyway* clip. Ask the students, “What did these actors do that was successful in creating character? What made their characters interesting? Believable?” Decide as a class what elements make a character interesting to watch and set this as your standard of measurement. Encourage the students to focus on creating and consistently maintaining their character throughout all of the activities in class today.

Step 3 (15 minutes): Hitchhiker – Choose four to come to the front of the class. Place four chairs in the front of the classroom and have three students take a seat. Explain that these three students are driving to (choose a destination) and along the way they run across a strange hitch hiker with a specific quirk (an accent, a genre, a twitch etc.). As they stop to let the hitchhiker in the car, everyone else in the vehicle suddenly adapts the hitchhiker’s quirk. After driving for sometime one of the passengers exits the vehicle and a new hitchhiker enters the car with a new quirk. The activity repeats.

Step 4 (2 minutes): Ask the students, “Where you following the guidelines? What could we do better?” Explain that we are now going to add the element of “Show-don’t tell” element.

Step 5 (15 minutes): Who Game- In this game, there are two players. One will be A, the other B. A is seated on stage. B enters. B has a definite, predetermined character relationship with A but has not told A what it is. By the way B relates to A, A must discover who A is. For example, A (a girl) is seated on a bench. B (another girl) enters and says, “Hello, darling, how are you?” She fusses over A’s hair. She walks around A looking her over; asks her to stand up, turns her around, saying “You look beautiful.” B then puts her arms around A, rocks her tenderly, wipes away a tear, fixes long skirt and headdress, until A knows that B is her mother and she is the daughter on her wedding day. Model this for the students with one student volunteer. After you have explained the game to the students and modeled, allow each student to have a turn. Encourage the students to let their identities reveal themselves, and to be patient.

Step 6 (3 minutes): Ask after each group, “Did B show the relationship or tell? Did A allow the character to be revealed? After the final group has gone, ask the students, “Did you follow the guidelines we established for character?” Ask the students to personally reflect on what they might have done better to establish their characters.

Step 7 (5 minutes): Lay out the butcher paper and ask the students to write down ideas for characters in as little words as possible. Explain that these could be famous people, specific quirks or characteristics, etc. Explain that this will be used for reference throughout our unit in case they draw a blank or get stuck when deciding on a character.

Step 7 (20 minutes): Let’s Make a Date- Inform the students that we are now going to further our practice with the following game. Choose four students (three of the same gender). The three players are given a specific character; the fourth is on the game show “Let’s Make a Date”. This player asks the three other contestants questions such as “if you were to take me on a date, where would we go?” The contestant is to answer the questions in their character. After a few questions, the player must guess the identity of the three contestants.

Step 8 (5 minutes): Review the standards that were set as a class. Ask the students to identify ways that they saw those standards met.

**Assessment**

Students will reflect on and review the standards that they set and identify their successes throughout the class.

**Author's Notes**

*Improvisation for the Theatre* 3rd edition by Viola Spolin.

**4: Scene Disaster!**

**Objective**

Students will apply their knowledge of improvisation in a performance setting by performing a scene with obstacles.

**Materials Needed**

copies of a contentless scene for the entire class - included,

note cards labeled with persona descriptions:

·         You always miss your entrance

·         You frequently forget your next line

·         You get stage freight

·         You forget your blocking

·         You frequently break character

**Related Documents**

* Contentless scenes

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

(8 minutes): Have the students sit with you in a circle. Explain that you are going to tell them a story about yourself. Relate to the students a time when you were in a performance and something went wrong, such as a missing prop, someone missed their entrance, costume malfunction, etc.

**Instruction**

Step 1( 2 minutes): Explain to the students that many times when we are performing things go wrong and we need to always be ready to cover mistakes. Oftentimes these situations require a little improvisation from the actors.

Step 2 (5 minutes): Ask the students, “What are some possible things that have gone wrong in a scene you have done or a play that you have seen? Most importantly, what did actors do to cover the mistake? How did it affect the audience?” Let the students give their answers.

Step 3 (10 minutes): Ask the students “When you are performing what are some things that could go wrong? What can you do to recover? Is there any way to prepare for such an event?” You may choose to get really specific such as, “What could you do if you accidently tripped on stage?” or “What could you say if your scene partner blanks and does not remember their line?” You may want to write their suggestions on the board.

Step 4 (5-7 minutes): Invite the students to get into groups of 3. Give each group contentless scenes and give them 5-7 minutes to read through it and rehearse it. Explain that these need to be as polished as possible. They will need to have distinct setting and characters.

Step 5 (25 minutes): Ask the students perform their scenes. As each group gets up to perform hand one student a note card with a persona. Explain to the student that they need to incorporate it into their performance. Explain to the entire class that their objective is to stay in character and to adapt their scene as necessary remaining true to the script and character. Students are expected to continue the scene and to apply the ideas discussed earlier in recovering their scenes.

Step 6 (15 minutes): After each performance, receive feedback from the actors. What was their experience like? What was difficult? Having more time now to think - is there anything that you would have done differently? Evaluate with the class what the actors did well to recover. What else could they have done?   Repeat this process with each of the scenes. If any actors really struggle to improvise a good recovery, allow them to try it again but with a different persona.

Step 7 (5 minutes): Brainstorm with the students ways that an actor might learn to prepare for incidences like this? How can an actor become better at improvisation?

Step 8 (5 minutes): Assure the students that surprises inevitably come in performances no matter how much you try to prevent them. Strengthening improvisational skills and knowing what to do in such situations is what truly makes an actor professional. Review with the students what things they have learned today about improvising during a performance.

**Assessment**

Students will apply their knowledge of improvisation for performance by performing a contentless scene with obstacles and reflecting on their experience.

**5: Rules Reviewed**

**Objective**

Students will interpret and apply the 8 guidelines of improv by creating a 2 minute skit and game that demonstrates the guidelines given.

**Lesson Directions**

**Anticipatory Set/Hook**

(2 minutes): Explain to the students their assignment, which is the following (you may want to write these requirements on the board):

#1 Create a 2-3 minute skit demonstrating your principle.

#2 Choose a game that will help us practice your principle, or create an original game.

#3 Explain your principle to the class, and perform your skits, and lead the class in your improv game.

**Instruction**

Step 1 (2 minutes): Place the students in four different groups, assign them a DO and a DON’T in which they will use to complete their assignment.

·         Group 1:

o   DO – Listen

o   DON’T – Force funniness

·         Group 2:

o   DO – Forward the action

o   DON’T – Denial

·         Group 3:

o   DO – 100% commitment

o   DON’T – Worry about making mistakes

·         Group 4:

o   DO – Support your team members

o   DON’T – Tell rather than show

Step 2 (20 minutes): Explain to the students that they have 20 minutes to prepare their presentations and to prepare their game.  Circle the room guiding the students in their ideas. Be available for questions and provide possible ideas or directions.

Step 3 (55 minutes): Have group 1 begin the presentations. Be sure that you leave time for everyone to present- this might mean you only play the games once or twice.

Step 4 (5 minutes):  At the end of class, Review the eight guidelines for improv and explain that next class will be their final performances in which the two teams established at the beginning of the unit will be competing against one another.

**Assessment**

Students will present their guidelines to the class through a skit and a game.

**6: Performances**

**Objective**

Students will demonstrate their understanding of the rules of improv by participating in a final improv performance/competition.

**Materials Needed**

Create a set up for the competition: sets of chairs on each side of the stage (for large classes you may need some on the floor), You may want to provide a list for the teams of the options of games that they can challenge the other team to.

**Related Documents**

* Games used in Unit
* Performance Rubric

**Lesson Directions**

**Instruction**

**\*Note:**The ideas presented in this particular lesson will vary according to each school’s program. In my particular school we had two drama classes learning the same unit and they came together at lunchtime to compete against each other. They were able to invite their friends and families to come and watch and we provided pizza. This lesson is written for that particular situation. In other settings you may just divide your classroom and have the competition during class.

Everything in this lesson is to be done just as if you were to go see a Comedy Sportz show. There can be music, sound effects etc.

Hook:As the facilitator, welcome the audience to the game. You may want to explain what the students have been doing in class to prepare and some of the basic rules of Comedy Sportz competitions. The facilitator calls out the players by introducing the team name and then calling each of the players onto the stage using their individual cheers from the beginning of the unit.

Step 1:Invite each of the team’s captains to the front of the stage. After a coin toss, the team with the starting advantage challenges the other team to the game of their choice (for options used in this unit that both teams will be familiar with see handout at end of the unit).

Step 2:Various improv games are played. Points are awarded accorded to the specific game. Most games involve a vote from the audience but if judges are needed, asking teachers to be on the panel would be fun!

Step 3:Assure that each student participates at least once.

Step 4:Announce the “winner” and congratulated the players for their good game!

**Assessment**

Students will demonstrate their knowledge of improv through an improv performance for the student body during lunch.