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APPLIED IMPROVISATION MAGAZINE



HUMAN
INTELLIGENT
GENERATIVE
HOPEFUL
AIM HIGH

JOEL VEENSTRA
AIN: Our Journey

KIRSTEN ANDERSON
Reimagining the Conference Experience

BRIGHT SU
Improv is Tao in Western Context

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In article paragraphs, if you see **text in bold & color**, or this ↗ symbol, it could be a link to a website or email.

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE APPLIED IMPROVISATION NETWORK

As the publisher, I welcome you to our second issue. On behalf of the AIN Board of Directors, we are so grateful for your support of last year's launch issue, and we are excited to continue to share our passion for Applied Improvisation with you.

One of the things I am most proud of about AIN is its commitment to diversity and inclusion. Everyone has a story to tell, and AIN wants to provide multiple platforms for those voices to be heard. Over three years ago, AIN started hosting a weekly virtual Open Space that continues to welcome diverse ideas in three friendly time zones. The global annual conference in Vancouver in July 2023 provided access to brand new AIN voices through 12 scholarship recipients – the most ever awarded. And this issue features articles from writers of all backgrounds and perspectives.

I would like to thank our team of writers, editors, designers, and other contributors for their hard work on this issue. Without their dedication, this magazine would not be possible. And I want to thank our AIN Members. Their annual financial support makes AIN Open Space, AINx Watch Parties, AIN Mentorship Program, and this very magazine possible. **(Learn how to join.)**

As the president of AIN, I invite you to become a member – if you or your friends haven't yet – and be part of a global community of Applied Improvisation enthusiasts and professionals. Membership grants you access to our growing benefits, collaborative opportunities, and an international network of like-minded individuals. Join our network and embark on a journey of growth and innovation today!

Please enjoy this second issue and consider ordering **print-on-demand copies from magcloud.com/user/appliedimprovisationmagazine** and sharing them with clients.

Welcome to the AIN Family!



ED REGGI
AIN BOARD

Ed Reggi is a lifelong storyteller. He's originally from New York City and moved to Chicago's The Second City, which led him to work with Paul Sills for over a decade. Today he's faculty at Lindenwood University and the Center of Creative Arts (COCA) in St. Louis, Missouri. Reggi joined the AIN Board in 2018 and started serving as the President in 2021. edreggi@gmail.com

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"...a web of ripples, spreading creativity and innovation in ways I had never foreseen."



Applied
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Network



WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Welcome to the second issue of Applied Improvisation Magazine! I am thrilled to present to you a diverse array of articles, insights, and stories that highlight the incredible impact of improvisation in various aspects of our work and lives.

In this issue, we delve into the profound ways in which improvisational principles are being employed in businesses, educational settings, social work, healthcare, and more – or, as we refer to it in one of our seven magazine sections, “Everything Else.” The topics go wide!

Our team has had the privilege of connecting with practitioners in the field, whose innovative applications of improvisation continue to reshape traditional paradigms. From a thought-provoking think piece that explores the parallels between improvisation and agile interview skills, to real-life accounts of how improvisation techniques have transformed high-pressure medical situations, this issue underscores the boundless possibilities that arise when we embrace the spontaneity and adaptability at the core of improvisation. The topics go deep!

There is so much content to explore. I would invite you to visit the brief intro of our seven magazine Sections. All content was designed

to inspire, educate, and invigorate your passion for Applied Improvisation. Along your reading journey, please enjoy the rich photos and selected videos, and download free material. Yes, we have free goodies!

It is my hope that the brilliance within these pages inspires you to view challenges through a new lens, to embrace uncertainty with confidence, and to harness the power of improvisation to lead more fulfilling lives. As always, I invite you to actively engage with the articles, join the conversations, and contribute your own experiences to this vibrant network.

Thank you for your continued support and for being a part of the Applied Improvisation Magazine community. We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed crafting it.

Improvise on!



BRIGHT SU
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Bright is an improv coach and an MBA-educated business consultant, based in California, USA. He is the author of *Ji Xing Xi Ju (Improvisational Theatre, 2020)*, a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation. brightsu@gmail.com



SAVE THE DATES

July 18th to July 21st, 2024

2024 AIN Global Conference (in person)

Prague, Czech Republic

[➤ Watch intro video](#)



AI EVERYWHERE



AI Everywhere was born of curiosity. This section explores how Applied Improvisation is used in different domains, by different people, all over the globe. From city landscapes to hospitals to community centers and more, we explore how Applied Improvisation is making its mark in diverse settings. Discover inspiring stories of how this practice is fostering innovation, collaboration, and adaptive thinking across industries. We wondered whether we could find AI everywhere, and our initial answer is a resounding “Yes, and...”

Improvisation: A Way to Untake the World for Granted

Words by

JEANNE LAMBIN

Perhaps you have had this experience: once you start noticing something and paying attention to it, you see it everywhere. This may be your experience with improvisation and the improvisational mindset: once you start engaging with it, you see it everywhere. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the frequency illusion, occurs when the thing you've just noticed, experienced, or been told about suddenly crops up seemingly constantly.

This phenomenon is thought to be due to our ability to pay "selective attention." Selective attention is, just like it sounds, our

ability to select and focus on a particular input while ignoring other things.

Just because something captures our attention, does not mean that we actually attend to or are present for it. Our selective attention can fray over time. Indeed, when something is seemingly everywhere, it can be hard to pay sustained attention to the instances in which it occurs. We can take it for granted.

In the haste and hustle of everyday life, we miss the tens of millions of improvisations, great and small, that whirl and hum in the background of our lives. We can overlook one

manifestations of the improvisational mindset: the urban landscape, aka our cities.

Here's a stunning fact: over 55% of the world's population, about 4.22 billion people, live in urban areas. By 2050, the UN estimates, that number will grow to over 68%. If improvisation is everywhere, so too are cities. In recent years, I have come to think of cities, especially our older cities, as a very literal embodiment of accept and build (which could also be described as "Yes, and...").

The city provides the backdrop of so many of our lives. Those places, those



PHOTO FROM CHICAGO ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHING COMPANY

AI EVERYWHERE

“The city is much more than just a place or a space. It is a story. It is a scene partner in the co-creative process.”

spaces, provide the envelope in which we write and insert the letter of our lives. The city is much more than just a place or a space. It is a story. It is a scene partner in the co-creative process. As Winston Churchill once famously said, “We shape our buildings and afterward, our buildings shape us.”

I was shaped by the city. I was shaped by improvisation.

Early Lessons in Letting Go

I grew up in a city. I grew up in Chicago. I grew up in the same house that my dad grew up in, in the same neighborhood that my family had lived in for decades. The house became the final resting place for the assorted ephemera of many family members. Dishes from Aunt Mary, radio cabinets built by Uncle Lee, boxes of photos of people whose images remained, but whose names were forgotten. Lists, letters, legal documents, postcards, mass cards, card cards, and so on. I always felt an affinity for these items and the stories attached to them. These objects and stories were a proxy for people I would never meet. I was constantly pestering both of my parents for stories of these people that were no more. The past always felt very present, even if elements of it were rapidly disappearing.

I grew up in the US, at the tail end of the first phase of the often-problematic program of urban renewal, funded by the US Federal Government (similar programs cropped up across



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEANNE LAMBIN

the globe). In the US, as in many other places, this meant the dislocation and destruction of block after block of our visible past, earning it the moniker “urban removal”.

By the time I arrived in this world, they were no longer clear-cutting vast swaths of Chicago, but demolishing the past was still a go-to option. I always found this great getting-rid-of perplexing, baffling, and wasteful. I wanted to do something about it.

One of the first buildings that I tried to “save” was the Granada Theater, an architectural confection, opened in 1926, at a

time when movies were so grand, so splendid, and so unusual, that they required palaces in which to view them.

Times changed, movie-watching habits changed, and the people who once populated the seats to full capacity disappeared. With the introduction of television, it was easy to take movies for granted. The collective selective attention had moved on. The Granada managed to stumble along, and it was still open, for a short window of my childhood. Enveloped in this cavernous space, dark save for the light of the screen and the exit lights, I watched Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and will forever remember Dave imploring

Hal to open the pod bay doors, and the space inside the theater and the space on the screen becoming one.

The theater closed shortly thereafter, and - after a few stilted efforts to revive it - thus began the slow slide into decline, because as much as we need buildings, buildings also need us. When we are not occupying them, their ecosystem of existence fails, giving way to rot and decay. By the time I was in high school, The Granada was threatened with demolition and replacement with an uninspired apartment block. I joined forces with the Save the Granada Theater committee, a rag-tag group of advocates to try to save it.

A Study in Contrasts

It was also at about this time that I enrolled in my first improv class at what was then ImprovOlympic (now iO) and started learning about the “rules,” or, as I like to call them, the building blocks of improvisation. I prefer this because it makes me think of being a kid with a trunk full of blocks, and how boundless and buoyant my young imagination was. Also embedded in the idea of a building block is the impulse to take something and transform it into something else. Accept and build.

At the time, iO was housed in a characterful building with many previous lives. In a somewhat dingy classroom above a bar, I learned the ins and outs of attention, “Yes, and...”, letting go, and so much more. This was a stark contrast to what happened at City Hall, where, in asking

“It would take me a while to realize that historic preservation could be viewed as one of the ultimate expressions of ‘Yes, and...’ or ‘accept and build’.”

that the City block the demolition, the Save the Granada Theater Committee heard that single, solitary, possibility-destroying word, no.

After a protracted battle that spanned several years, the building was demolished. It was a painful and poignant lesson in the devastation of negation and a powerful lesson in letting go.

Eventually, I returned to school to get my degree in historic preservation/heritage conservation, which can be broadly defined as preserving the past as a livable present for future generations. In historic preservation, there is, of course, the idea that you keep or preserve what is there. Then there is also the idea that if you are going to tear something down, you put up something better in its place. That did not happen with the Granada.

It would take me a while to realize that historic preservation could be viewed as one of the ultimate expressions of “Yes, and...” or “accept and build.” To take what was there before and add to it. An accretive and collective effort to which we all contribute. When you look at an old building, a city, a skyline, you see the result of decades, if not centuries, of accepting and building.



IMAGE COURTESY OF JEANNE LAMBIN

What if the university had said, “Yes, we will save the theater and transform it into something else.”?

And I want to be absolutely clear: this is not a rallying cry to save everything, or that the past is all GREAT!!! It’s not.

And I want to be absolutely clear: sometimes “no” is and should be a complete answer.

“Yes, and...” or “accept and build” is no more the answer to everything, than saving everything is the answer to anything.

In building cities, in building places, in building lives, there are those choices that, by their nature, remove so many other choices, so many possibilities. This was one of those.

Things will get destroyed. Things will always get destroyed. That’s why we have the ability to let go.

Because this is the Age of the Great Eradication, thus letting go becomes an essential skill to cope with the collective grief of so much erasure.

Accept and build...or not

This takes us back to the devastation of negation, those places where conflict, war, natural disasters, urban renewal, economic displacement, racism, rampant capitalism, and inequity have resulted in the erasure of places, and more importantly, the people and their stories that once populated

“It could be said that intentionality is what makes improvisation applied.”

them. No is a complete sentence.

The idea of accepting and building, as applied to our places and spaces, is an invitation to be thoughtful, to be inclusive, and to be intentional. Our ability to pay selective and sustained attention can be a superpower. It could be said that intentionality is what makes improvisation applied. We can leverage our selective attention by attending to it, by being intentional.

In cities, as in life, what we choose to accept and build on deserves careful consideration, a conscious and intentional counterpoint to what we intentionally overlook, erode, obfuscate, and destroy.

In this Age of the Great Eradication, when so much is being destroyed, how can we be intentional about what we hold on to? How do we extend this beyond buildings and cities, to the world?

How do we accept and build in this world?

This world, this world, this world, so enmeshed in what some have described as the polycrisis, that even our crises have crises. The world is literally burning.

How do you accept *that*? How do you build on that when it can be a relief to not pay attention to it, selective or otherwise?

How do you let go to hang on?

Perhaps you will have this experience: once you start noticing something, you can start accepting it, once you start accepting something you can start building something new from it.

Perhaps Applied Improvisation can bring ease to uncertainty and compassion when that ease is not available.

Perhaps Applied Improvisation is a way to untake the world for granted. 🌍



JEANNE LAMBIN

Jeanne is a writer, facilitator, and storyteller based in Chicago. She is the founder of *The Human Imagination Project* which exists to help people connect to the magic of the ordinary, the extraordinary and everything in-between. She is the creator of *Eleven Minutes To Mars*, which helps people reimagine their relationship with time and attention in order to live with intention and the co-creator of *The Quest: Improvisation for Transformation*.

thehumanimaginationproject.com
elevenminutestomars.com

AI IN EDUCATION



Educators are often imaginative, using activities in class to illustrate a lesson, teach team skills or simply have fun. These four articles in different contexts come from a range of educators in elementary school, high school and in college. What is common is the educators' desire to help their students achieve better outcomes using Applied Improvisation. Let these articles inspire you to take more risks, play more games, and use more AI.

Reimagining a Collaborative Final Exam

Words by
CAITLIN MCCLURE



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAITLIN MCCLURE

“Final Exam?! But this is a course on leadership and *improv*,” my students gasped.

For the past two years, I have taught *Leading Creative Collaboration*, a required course within the Executive MBA program at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, in the U.S. In 2022, I challenged myself to add a final exam that would be true to the spirit of the course while still avoiding the drawbacks of traditional exams that are usually stressful solo endeavors and may not indicate actual competency.

In addition to being guided by improv principles, such as *be average and give and take*, I frequently rely on a fundamental lesson from Keith Johnstone:

clearly identify the problem to be solved, then create a tool/process to solve it. So, I defined my problem like this: What kind of final exam will function as a capstone experience for the students, will reinforce the principles of collaboration, and will uncover the ways the students had developed?

As a solution, I created 12 questions on the exam—to cover topics that I felt were vital to their understanding of the material—then I asked the students to provide the other 12. My intention was a) to reinforce their sense of being an ensemble, capable of supporting each other’s learning, b) to reframe a final exam as something more than transactional, and c) to create a frisson of excitement about what their peers might ask of them.

Here are two sample questions from me:

“According to Stuart Brown, work is the opposite of play. True or False?”

“Why does the theory of Organizational Climate (as opposed to Organizational Culture) matter to leaders?”

Here are two questions from students:

“Describe a time where you used an improv tenet to deal with a difficult conversation.”

“Which of the following is not an improv principle? a) Be obvious, b) Leap before you look, c) Sympathize with your partner, d) Give and take.”

Our classes were held in-person with the 11 students divided into three teams. Seated with their teams, I set up the final exam:

- The exam is open book; they can use online or any other materials.
- They have half an hour to prepare answers.
- They will state answers aloud; no need for writing
- They can skip their own submitted questions.
- Each team will be graded collectively.

I handed out the exam paper, started a countdown clock and said, “Go!” When they first

looked at the questions, they were sweating and serious. It was 10 points out of their grade of 100. They were relieved as I reminded them the exam was graded collectively.

They spent the first few minutes reviewing the questions, then deciding who would answer each one. Except for the shuffle of papers and the sound of clicking keyboards, the room was silent, punctuated by the occasional voices, “Oh, let me do question four!” or “Sal, you could share that story about your roommate for question 12.”

Half an hour later, laptops down, they were ready. I asked each team to tell me their answer to Question One. Then I shared the “correct” answer and distributed

their points accordingly, tallied on a whiteboard. We continued like this for all 24 questions, which took about 40 minutes to complete.

Hooray, what a final exam!

I really wasn’t sure how the grading part was going to work out, but it turned into a delightful free-for-all; a full-class conversation and discovery process. One big discovery is the degree to which they supported each other, big time! They gave the simpler questions to their teammates who had struggled the most during the semester. Those students could have simply stayed quiet, but everyone was given at least one chance to speak and was encouraged by their team to answer confidently, with cheers



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAITLIN MCCLURE

and approval once they earned their point.

That indicated to me that they were showing up true to what Leonard and Yorton say in their book, *Yes, And* (2015, p.71): "...your ensemble is only as good as its ability to compensate for its weakest member."

One team asked to change their answer after hearing another team's response. I couldn't think of a reason to say no as the whole idea was to work collaboratively. At other times, they made compelling arguments for why I should accept their answer even if I initially indicated that it didn't quite hit the mark. It became a fully collaborative process with students arguing on behalf of their peers, even for other teams.

I did not indicate beforehand how the exam would be graded, but hinted the process mattered more than the answers. Since they got most of the answers correct, I gave everyone all ten points. It was clear from their full commitment to the exam and to each other that the experience itself was more important than the actual answers.

"An exam like this could only have come from an Applied Improvisation mindset."

Why is this Applied Improvisation? We didn't play then debrief any improv games!

An exam like this could only have come from an Applied

Improvisation mindset, rather than a traditional, hierarchical, right/wrong approach to pedagogy. I felt validated when I later realized that our exam hit all of the *Top 10 Elements of AI*, as identified in the 2014 *Delphi Study Summary* by Barbara Tint and Adam Froerer:

- 1) Making your partner look good
- 2) Yes, and...
- 3) Atmosphere of play
- 4) Curious listening
- 5) Complete acceptance
- 6) Flexibility/Spontaneity
- 7) Focus on the here and now
- 8) Risk taking
- 9) Personal awareness/mindfulness
- 10) Balance of freedom and structure

After the exam, one of the less strong students said to me, "I had been worried about the test, and now I am thrilled I actually helped my team be victorious." Then one of my strongest students shook my hand, looked me in the eye, and said, "Caitlin, Thank You!" I asked, "for what?" She continued, "For years I wanted to challenge the status quo at work but felt daunted to try. The experience today proved I can reinvent how work gets done."

Yes, I was high as a kite. Not only had the experiment worked, I stumbled upon a new process I could use again in the future. Ultimately, my students had had an experience of challenging and supporting each other to learn, the experience reinforced what

"Ultimately, my students had had an experience of challenging and supporting each other to learn, [and that] experience reinforced what we had been practicing all semester in real time..."

we had been practicing all semester in real time, and we collectively and collaboratively finished up the course true to its intent. Long live Applied Improvisation! 🌍



CAITLIN MCCLURE

Caitlin McClure is a leadership development consultant, executive coach, professor in the business schools of Stevens Institute of Technology and Baruch College, and co-editor of two books of case studies, *Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating & Creating Beyond the Theatre* and *The Applied Improvisation Mindset*. Her MA is in Adult Learning and Leadership from Columbia University. She lives in New Rochelle, New York.

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BOOKSHELF

Books are more patient than most people. They understand us and bind us together as authors, readers and reviewers. They break the shackles of locale and time. In this issue, we have author Susanne Schinko-Fischli introducing her timely *Learning Social Skills Virtually*, while Paul Z Jackson introduces his *Easy* way and reviews a few books in the currently nicely developed AI Bookshelf.

Learning Social Skills Virtually

Words by
SUSANNE SCHINKO-FISCHLI

Title: Learning Social Skills Virtually: Using Applied Improvisation to Enhance Teamwork, Creativity and Storytelling

Publisher: Routledge (December 15, 2021)

Paperback: 104 page

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I never thought it was possible to work online with Applied Improvisation (AI)! In March 2020, I had the choice to stop earning money or to try working online. To my surprise, the latter can be just as successful as in person. These days, I work up to one third of my time online and accept assignments from all over the world.

Over the recent few years, digital workshops and meetings have established a firm foothold. My book, *Learning Social Skills Virtually*, demonstrates how online workshops and meetings can be just as interactive, varied and enjoyable as face-to-face events. Improvisational theater methods are surprisingly well suited for online use and can elicit the liveliness, playful levity, and co-creativity that are often lacking in digital lessons and meetings.

The book consists of the following chapters:

1. Introduction: I begin by introducing AI and its online possibilities. I'm preaching to the choir when I mention to this magazine's readers that AI is

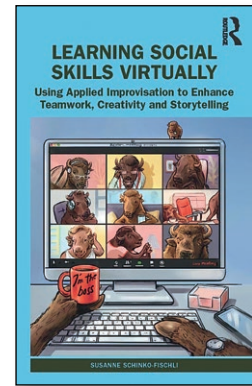
one of the best methods to convey social competencies offline and online!

2. Creativity: In the second chapter, I explore online communication for creativity and co-creativity. Improvisational theater is at its core, real teamwork, and therefore, offers a large pool of exercises that promote and strengthen team cohesion. It is more challenging, but still possible to build openness and trust in teamwork online.

3. Storytelling: Improvisational theater is always about storytelling. When improvisers say, "yes, and..." they are guided by how well a story is constructed. Our brain loves stories. When managers, scientists or politicians want to reach their audience, the best way is to wrap their message in a story right from the start. This chapter is about how stories and heroes' journeys are structured and what exercises can be used online to train storytelling.

4. Status: Status involves non-verbal and verbal signals' potential effects on our social influence. Although we can only see parts of our bodies online, the topic of status still plays an unchanged major role. The aim of all online and offline status exercises is to increase our status flexibility, in order to adapt our status behavior to the situation at hand.

5. Practical Examples: In the last chapter, I delve into three online workshops for different organizations and describe actual scenarios from these workshops. Several chapters throughout the book end with a collection of exercises for online use.



This book is for everyone — facilitators, coaches, teachers, and leaders — who are seeking new inspiration for their digital workshops and meetings, and who aspire to expand the variety of their online methods. It offers new perspectives on many “soft skill” topics and supports interactive, engaging, lively and productive online learning.

My fellow Applied Improvisation community, I hope you continue to have fun and success working with Applied Improvisation online and offline and I would love to hear from you! 🌐



SUSANNE SCHINKO-FISCHLI

Susanne Schinko-Fischli studied psychology and acting at the University of Vienna and the University of California, San Diego. Since 2004, she has been an independent trainer, with a focus on and passion for the methods of Applied Improvisation. As a trainer in the areas of social skills, storytelling, teamwork and creativity, she works online and offline for well-known organizations in Europe. She is also the author of the book *Applied Improvisation for Coaches and Leaders* (Routledge, 2018).

cocreative.ch/en

Improvisation as an Easy LIFE PASS

Words by
PAUL Z JACKSON

Download and discover Easy: Your LIFE PASS to Creativity and Confidence by Paul Z Jackson, with illustrations by Angelina Castellini

In a complex world of constant hustle, finding simplicity and ease appears to be an unattainable dream. I set out to challenge that notion, by drawing on the practical wisdom from improvisation. I aimed to show how improvisation tenets reveal the path to an easier life.

First I had to organize those tenets. If you ask 12 improvisers for the principles, rules or guidelines to improvisation, you'll get a dozen lists. And while some differences may be cosmetic or 'merely semantics', key tenets are contested, while others convey significantly different meanings. 'Yes, and...', for example, makes most lists, but generates much discussion as to what it entails.

Even more challenging is that most writing about improvisation has centered on theatrical improv, and it's clear that not everything you might tell a performer in the safety of a workshop will translate without further thought into useful advice for a world of greater stakes and infinitely more purposes. Context matters and this is the Applied Improvisation community.

I also wanted my list to be

comprehensive, touching on all aspects of improvisation. Oh, and one more ask: wrap it all up in a memorable acronym.

Early contenders for the acronym included STARTREK, and I eventually settled on LIFE PASS.

My ambition was to explain the heart of what's distinctive and important about improvisation with these principles:

- Let Go
- Inhabit the Moment
- Freedom within Structure
- Embrace Uncertainty
- Play to Play
- Accept and Build
- Short Turn Taking
- Spot Successes

You can read the details and sense-check my selection by downloading the book for free (tiny.cc/aim002-easy).

What sets Easy apart from other improvisation books is the presupposition that everyone already has plenty of skill and experience as an improviser. We all improvise every day. We are good at it.

So instead of addressing readers from an expert perspective with an author's new and somewhat arcane set of skills that the readers need to learn, it helps you to

“Easy helps you to rearrange what you already know. It articulates a framework within which to make sense of life’s experiences, and offers activities to develop skills further.”

rearrange what you already know. It articulates a framework within which to make sense of life's experiences, and offers activities to develop skills further.

And because these are important life skills such as resilience, presence, confidence and creativity, the approach is direct, rather than via the admittedly well-stocked cupboard of theatrically-based exercises, which are exhaustively covered in many other improv books (including my own 58½ *Ways*



to Improvise in Training: Improvisation Games and Activities for Workshops, Courses and Team Meetings). By non-theatrical, I mean there's no need to assume an audience or any role other than yourself.

Reflecting on what's happened since publication, I notice that the world has experienced a pandemic, which interrupted all our plans and reminded us just how improvisational life can be. Perhaps people will more readily appreciate the pragmatic value of approaching it via an improvisational lens such as LIFE PASS.

Improvisation can be central and practical, not only for when things go wrong or depart from the plan, but as first choice when it's going steadily (so we can respond to bumps along the way) and – for maximum added value – to make the most of peak performance and flow states when it's going well.

By responding skillfully to what's around us, we can pay attention to what's most salient. We can inhabit the moment to adapt to change and lead others more effectively. It's no surprise that the ideas in *Easy* are now applied increasingly in the world's most innovative and successful organizations. And we can expect that to continue as we assert our human capabilities in a rising tide of automation and artificial intelligence – the other AI.

Easy offers numerous benefits that transcend the book's pages. By embracing improvisation, readers can:

- **Enhance problem-solving skills:** Through the power of simple co-creation, readers gain a practical toolkit to tackle complex challenges with ease and creativity
- **Improve productivity and collaboration:** Actionable strategies to simplify work processes, fostering a more efficient and harmonious work environment
- **Cultivate personal well-being:** By incorporating ease into everyday life, readers can reduce stress, find balance, and increase overall well-being
- **Unlock hidden potential:** The book inspires readers towards creativity and innovation, allowing them to uncover new possibilities in their personal and professional endeavors

Readers of the book responded most positively:

“Humanitarian work is becoming impossibly demanding. It seems too difficult to absorb and process changing threats. How can we rapidly think and act under so much pressure and uncertainty? It is actually doable and enjoyable, if you embrace applied improvisation - shared so eloquently and accessibly by Paul Z Jackson in ‘Easy’. I recommend this book to all who aim to facilitate processes of learning and dialogue in a way that is both serious and fun.”

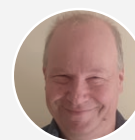
– Pablo Suarez, Associate director for research and innovation, Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

“The book’s concept - to use improvisation for business and LIFE - is inspired and important.”

– Patricia Ryan Madson, author of *Improv Wisdom*.

So, now exclusively for AIM readers, you can get into the action by downloading your copy here: [📖](#)

DOWNLOAD



PAUL Z JACKSON

Paul Z Jackson is editorial advisor and editor of the Applied Improvisation Magazine and author of books about improvisation, including *Improv Learning*, *58½ Ways To Improvise In Training* and *Easy: Your LIFE PASS to Creativity and Confidence*. He is co-founder and a long-serving board member of the AIN. Paul lives in Oxford, UK.

paul@impro.org.uk

EVERYTHING ELSE



In this section, we cast a wide net to include any matter in the world of Applied Improvisation that doesn't fit in other sections. This time we visit the AIN's historic journey as an organization, improvise our job interview and grow our intelligence on the legal aspects of running a business.

AIN: Our Journey

Over 20 Years of Bringing Applied Improvisers Together

Words by

JOEL VEENSTRA

Improvisation, like life, is ephemeral. Applied Improvisation (AI) practitioners know that utilizing improvisational principles can produce successful spontaneity and collaboration. Yet it can be difficult to accurately capture, document, and articulate this process of facilitating lightning in a bottle. And the same is true of trying to capture the history and scope of the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN).

From the beginning, the improvisational ideals of spontaneity, discovery, innovation, and generosity were embedded in the organization. Three presenters, Paul Z Jackson (England), Michael Rosenberg (Canada), and Alain Rostain (USA) discovered each other presenting at the International Alliance for Learning Conference in 2001. With each approaching AI from a different lens, they inspired and challenged one another to refine their work. After the conference, they created a 'Bulletin Board' listserv for like-minded individuals to connect, leading to a gathering at Dr. Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan's North American Simulation and Gaming Association (NASAGA) Conference in 2002. Momentum was building with roughly 35 participants, but this new stream threatened to overwhelm NASAGA, who encouraged them to create their own organization. While the initial focus was improvisation applied within a business context, they soon

discovered individuals applying improvisation to a wide range of fields including personal development, education, healthcare, performance, and humanitarian social change.

AIN has grown exponentially over the past two decades as practitioners continue to collaboratively support each other. The biggest community touchstone is the annual (or bi-annual) conference(s). Planning and production of these live events are emblematic of AI principles, including utilizing Open Space Technology (OST) as a foundational element. Each year improvisational trailblazers and special guests are honored; these have included Keith Johnstone, Aretha Sills (for Spolin/Sills), Colin Mochrie, Mick Napier, Armando Diaz, Adrian Jackson (for Augusto Boal), Ed Greenburg and Randy Dixon (for Del Close), Thiagi, and Alan Alda (for Stony Brook University's Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science). The relationships formed at these conferences have fueled innovation amongst the facilitators, who remain generous with their knowledge and opportunities.

Beyond the in-person events, mini-conferences, retreats, and roadshows, applied improvisers also continue to connect via technology. For example, weekly online Open Space provided an essential point of community, support, and guidance on how to navigate the world remotely within a month of the global pandemic shut-

down and continues to do so today. AIN resources have grown, including an extensive Facebook Group (with 8000+ individuals), a YouTube channel (featuring years of AIN content), Zoom events, and AIN Watch Parties.

The Mentorship program and Mastermind groups align seasoned practitioners with those who need guidance in developing their professional practice. Research continues to expand in validating and codifying AI practices, including AIN's 2014 Delphi Study. And in March 2023, AIN launched its first publication, the Applied Improvisation Magazine, to document and share the value of its work.

So many people have discovered their community within AIN over the past 20 years, and the network continues to grow, innovate, and elevate Applied Improvisation. What started as an organic group of like-minded individuals has developed into a diverse professional network of over 600 active members who call each other colleagues and friends. While "what comes next?" will always be the main question, it is equally valuable to reflect on what brought us to this point to help guide us into the future.

Special thanks to Paul Z Jackson, Angelina Castellini, Ed Reggi, Barbara Tint, Theresa Robbins Dudeck, Yael Schy, Sue Walden, and the AIN Community for your support in making this article and community possible. 🌍

AIN: our journey

2002

The North American Simulation and Gaming Association (NASAGA) Annual Conference (November)

The first "Applied Improvisation Conference" was a strand of this conference, under the title "Summit on Improvisation in Business" and roughly 40 people attended in San Diego, CA, USA

The NASAGA Board requested that these "Applied Improvisers" create their own event unrelated to NASAGA

Alain Rostain, 1st AIN President (2003 - 2007)

2006

AIN 2006: Amsterdam (March): Business Collides With...Improv Amsterdam, Noord Holland, Netherlands

AIN 2006: San Francisco San Francisco, CA, USA

2010

AIN Amsterdam Conference 2010: Using Improvisation to Change our Worlds (September) Amsterdam, Noord Holland, Netherlands

2004

Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) 2004: San Francisco: Leaping into the Chaos: Embracing the Unexpected in Business and in Life San Francisco, CA, USA

The name changed to Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) as members applied improvisation beyond business - in schools, academia, humanitarian sectors, coaching, personal development and beyond - and legally became a 501(c)(6) non-profit organization

2008

AIN 2008: AIN-EU Conference (May)Trondheim, Trondelag, Norway

AIN 2008 Chicago: Wide Open Spaces (October) Chicago, Illinois, USA

2012

AIN World Conference 2012: San Francisco: Be the Change (September) San Francisco, CA, USA

International Alliance for Learning Conference (January) Orlando, Florida, United States of America (USA)

Paul Z Jackson (London, England), Michael Rosenberg (Toronto, Canada), and Alain Rostain (USA) discovered one another presenting on what was soon to be known as Applied Improvisation - they created an online "Bulletin Board" listserv to connect with other like-minded individuals - initially called **Association for the Advancement of Improvisation in Business**

2001

Summit on Improvisation in Business (SIB) 2003: Toronto, Canada

First stand-alone "Applied Improvisation Conference" Toronto, Ontario, Canada

AIN 2005: New York: Everyday Epiphanies: Seeing and Seizing the Moments of Life, New York City, New York, USA

2005

AIN 2009: Tokyo: Yes And Bridges the Differences (March) , First Conference in Asia, Tokyo, Japan

AIN 2009: Portland: Apply THIS (September) Portland, Oregon, USA

2009

AIN 2007: Helsinki (June) Helsinki, Uusimaa, Finland

AIN 2007: Banff: Peak Experience (November) Banff, Alberta, Canada

Launch new AIN Website: Ning.com, created overnight by Leif Hansen (November)

Paul Z Jackson, 2nd AIN President (2007 - 2017)

2007

AIN World Conference 2011: Baltimore: Raising our Game/ Using Improv to Save the World (June), Baltimore, Maryland, USA

2011

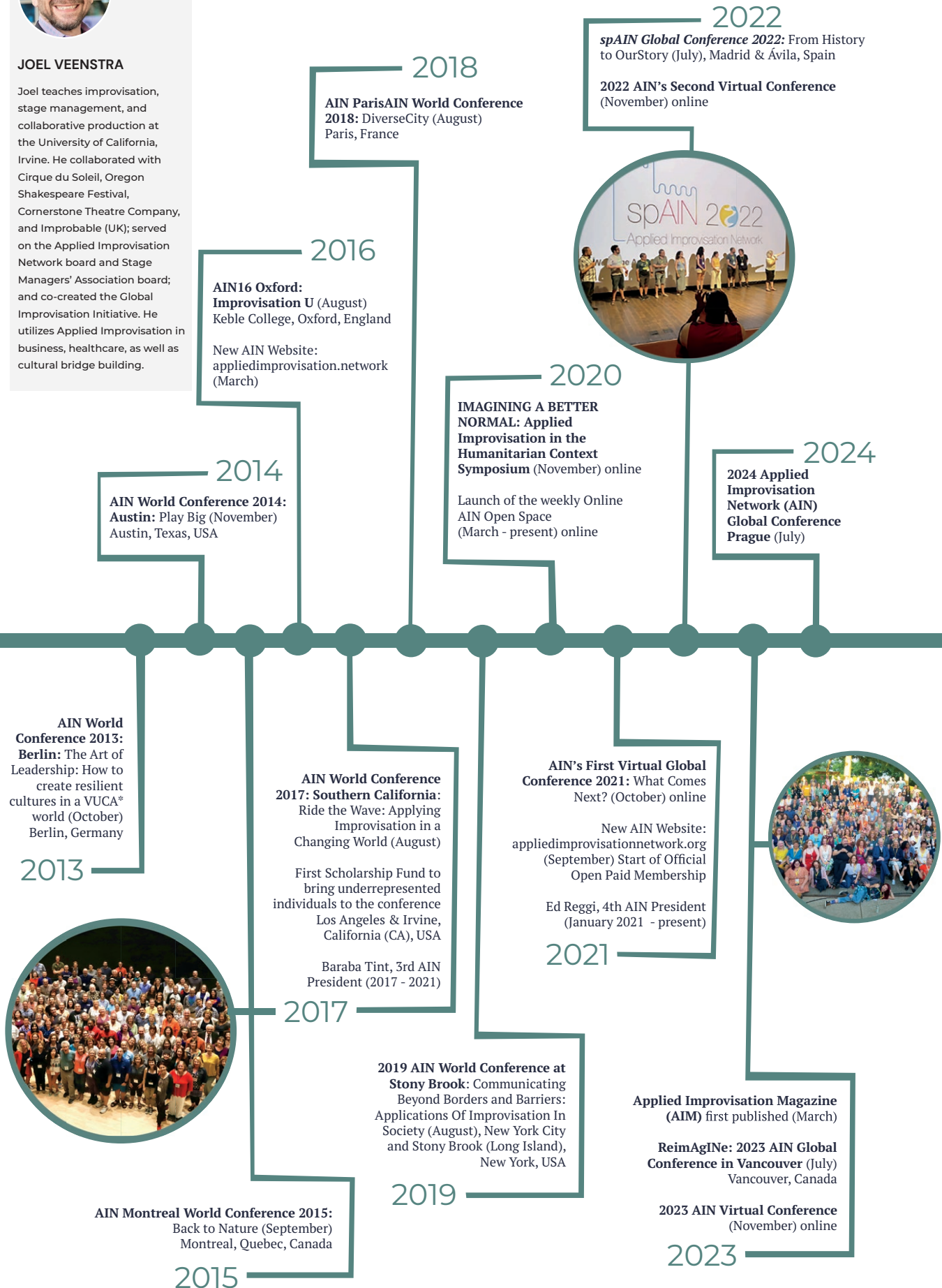


2003



JOEL VEENSTRA

Joel teaches improvisation, stage management, and collaborative production at the University of California, Irvine. He collaborated with Cirque du Soleil, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Cornerstone Theatre Company, and Improbable (UK); served on the Applied Improvisation Network board and Stage Managers' Association board; and co-created the Global Improvisation Initiative. He utilizes Applied Improvisation in business, healthcare, as well as cultural bridge building.



AIN World Conference 2013: Berlin: The Art of Leadership: How to create resilient cultures in a VUCA* world (October) Berlin, Germany

2013



AIN Montreal World Conference 2015: Back to Nature (September) Montreal, Quebec, Canada

2015

AIN World Conference 2017: Southern California: Ride the Wave: Applying Improvisation in a Changing World (August)

First Scholarship Fund to bring underrepresented individuals to the conference Los Angeles & Irvine, California (CA), USA

Baraba Tint, 3rd AIN President (2017 - 2021)

2017

2019 AIN World Conference at Stony Brook: Communicating Beyond Borders and Barriers: Applications Of Improvisation In Society (August), New York City and Stony Brook (Long Island), New York, USA

2019

2016

AIN16 Oxford: Improvisation U (August) Keble College, Oxford, England

New AIN Website: appliedimprovisation.network (March)

2018

AIN ParisAIN World Conference 2018: DiverseCity (August) Paris, France

2020

IMAGINING A BETTER NORMAL: Applied Improvisation in the Humanitarian Context Symposium (November) online

Launch of the weekly Online AIN Open Space (March - present) online

2014

AIN World Conference 2014: Austin: Play Big (November) Austin, Texas, USA

2022

spAIN Global Conference 2022: From History to OurStory (July), Madrid & Ávila, Spain

2022 AIN's Second Virtual Conference (November) online



2021

AIN's First Virtual Global Conference 2021: What Comes Next? (October) online

New AIN Website: appliedimprovisationnetwork.org (September) Start of Official Open Paid Membership

Ed Reggi, 4th AIN President (January 2021 - present)



2021

Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM) first published (March)

ReimAgINE: 2023 AIN Global Conference in Vancouver (July) Vancouver, Canada

2023 AIN Virtual Conference (November) online

2023

2024

2024 Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) Global Conference Prague (July)

Improvise Your Interview

Words by
VINCE RICCI

A pivotal moment in my life occurred during a Kellogg Business School interview, where I stumbled and failed to convey my true potential. Despite my interviewer's repeated requests for a story showcasing my leadership skills in a non-authoritative role, I found myself fixated on recounting instances where I held prestigious titles such as Director or President. It was not due to a lack of preparation but rather my failure to truly listen. Looking back, I realize I was avoiding her unexpected question because I was afraid of improvising.

“I guide my clients to perceive interruptions as unexpected gifts and view each unanticipated question as an opportunity for them to shine.”

Since that fateful day, I have applied my improvisation experience to empower individuals in their quest for success in job and admission interviews. Since 2002, I have helped hundreds of clients who seek admission to prestigious colleges and graduate schools or aspire to advance their careers through internships or jobs. Through this work, I have developed strategies that consistently yield favorable interview outcomes. For example, drawing on

improv insights, I guide my clients to perceive interruptions as unexpected gifts and view each unanticipated interview question as an opportunity for them to shine.

As an admissions expert, I have recently served as a board member of the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants (AIGAC), including a one-year tenure as President. AIGAC, in its 17-year history, has fostered trust and credibility, primarily through organizing annual conferences that facilitate meaningful interactions between admission directors from the world's top business schools. Most notably, our 2023 conference, hosted by Columbia Business School and the Yale School of Management, was a resounding success.

During these conferences, we actively seek input from admissions officers regarding their interview preferences and grievances. Remarkably, they consistently express their disdain for rehearsed responses, yearning instead for genuine conversations. Unfortunately, they often encounter over-rehearsed, robotic deliveries lacking emotion and authenticity. They genuinely want applicants to acknowledge the question at hand and take a moment to reflect on an example that answers the question behind the question.

In my earlier anecdote, my interviewer sought a story that exemplified my leadership abilities as a team member, regardless of my formal title. Regrettably, I





IN THE SANDBOX

We ask two Applied Improvisers to meet each other in the sandbox: a Zoom call to chat about their origin story, values and what Applied Improv brings them. We designed it so the improvisers really feed off on each other and share their insights, creating cross-pollination. In this first sandbox are Victoria Hogg and Michelle Clark. Here is the condensation of their wonderful conversation.



Victoria Hogg and Michelle Clark

Saying “Yes, but...” versus “No”

Vic:

Ah, the classic bedrock improv tenet of “Yes, and...”. As facilitators, we all unpack the difference between saying “No”, “Yes, but...” and “Yes, and...”. I teach clearly that saying “Yes, but...” *sounds* pro-active but it’s a sneaky safety thing, a status-heavy way of protecting yourself. “Yes, but...” is more problematic than saying “No”. “No” is clear. Even if you’re scared, think the offer is dangerous or you have a better idea, “Yes, but...” says, “Yes, it sounds like I’ve listened to your idea but I’m going to explain why I’m out.” It’s a very unhelpful, defended position, even though it sounds the opposite.

Michelle:

I train people to become coaches and I always say, “How about replacing that ‘but’ with ‘and’ in your coaching – and in your life?” Because it makes such a difference to how that language is going to be received and held in a coaching conversation.

Failure vs Mistakes

Vic:

You have your comfort zone (cosy familiarity), your panic zone (unacceptably scary vulnerability) and between them lies the sweet spot of the stretch zone, where you challenge yourself appropriately as you learn new skills. I’ve changed my mind regarding “celebrating failure”. I tried hard to buy into the mantra of “we suck and we love to fail” when I started. But I now state that we don’t want to celebrate failure because, actually, nobody *likes* to fail; it doesn’t feel nice. Plus I kept thinking to myself, “I can’t seem to celebrate failure! What’s wrong with me?!”

For me, now, it’s about being *comfortable* with failure. We are joyful scientists sifting data. Sure, we all occasionally make things more difficult for ourselves by mishandling offers, but we must aim to stay on a “Yes, and...” path that makes things fun and easy. Failure is a by-product of the work that we do; it’s not a goal so we can high-five each other over something that didn’t work out.

Michelle: I don't talk about failure much at all. I talk about mistakes. Mistakes are allowed. Furthermore, there are no mistakes when we weave them into the story. If we all agree that we have each other's backs, anything that appears to be a mistake, we'll pick it up and run with it. So in the space of psychological safety, we say, for example, in the leadership space or the workspace, we want to create a place where mistakes are okay. Not necessarily where failure is celebrated. But where mistakes are okay and they're learning points. So I talk a lot more about mistakes than I do about failure.

Debriefing

Vic: Thiagi (www.thiagi.com), as conveyed to me by William Hall, teaches clearly "It's all in the debrief". We must remind ourselves constantly that *any* exercise is solely for the purpose of setting up a debrief. We are here to unpack what just happened, in order to discuss it with the preordained challenge and desired outcome in mind.

Michelle: I was in Prague this 2023 at the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and I delivered an improv workshop to coaches and facilitators new to improv. The entire premise I gave them is that the *games* will be the teachers. I'm just here to facilitate, and to convene a collaboration. We learn, as you're saying, through a solid debrief. We put ourselves through the exercise – it's experiential – and then we ask the question, "What did the game teach us toward what we're hoping to achieve?"

Holding a space vs controlling it

Michelle: I am a facilitator, co-collaborating on the learning of everybody who's connected in that space. One isn't *running* the meeting. When working with a team using Applied Improv, I am not the lead. It's very self-organized, and that's what I teach teams: Let's self-organize so that everybody in the room is collaborating; everybody in the room is agreeing they're part of it.

Vic: "To hold space rather than control it" does two things: stops your ego from getting out of control and prevents your inner critic from doing the same. Otherwise, one can get in such a panic! "Am I doing the right thing?! It's got to be perfect!", etc. To have the pressure removed is wonderful: you're simply there to create and convene provocations for a group of like-minded people who are going to collaboratively unpack what's happening in real time.

Michelle: Yes, one is co-creating this experiential space together and feeling free adding what was not within the rules. Like recently, we were playing a game, it was clear how the game went, and somebody decided to add a rule. We were all co-collaborating, I didn't stop and say, "No, that's not the rule of the game!" Instead, I went, "Wow, how exciting is this!" We've just created a new level between us. The group embraces that new level and that gives others permission to start taking risks and adding in something.

Vic: I find there's an interesting tension between what you're *expecting* and what might happen. One must always be prepared to stop everything and have a conversation about what's emerging. It's easy with improv to create a super-fun session that ends on a positive collaboration high. Is this always the best area to lean into? Sometimes groups need some dismantling. You can't open half a can of worms.

IN THE SANDBOX

Michelle: This applies to everything. At some point it's wise to say, "Timeout! What do we think is happening here? What do we observe? What are we doing? What could we do better?" And then let's resume. It's important to have those pauses where a group can self-regulate or self-inquire.

Vic: I spent my early career trying to make everyone happy. Often one's scared of the group and trying not to upset the apple cart, and it's easy to create joy as distraction. I've come back around to building joyful sessions while simultaneously dealing with group difficulties. I just co-designed a workshop with the brilliant Carrie Caudle called "Make Room to Spark Joy", which embraced joy as a radical act in times of struggle. We explored collective effervescence, which was lovely.

The Future

Michelle: My recent workshop in Prague this 2023 was my first in-person workshop since Covid and it reminded me of how much I love to travel for in-person training. A kind of fuzzy horizon for me, therefore, is to get this work onto the road more. I've had the great good fortune of being in the AIN mentorship and I'm stoked that my mentor, who's halfway to that point, is helping me bring my vision to bear.

Vic: Wonderful! My latest direction is to create confidence courses that are asynchronous. They'll be instructional design packages that offer a rigorous yet fresh experience, where people can learn positively and gain value, regardless of working hours or time zones. I'm also creating a teaching system with a new business partner that we call "I.M.P.R.O.V. to Improve". Watch this space!

Michelle: I'm excited and thrilled we're connected, Vic, and I can't wait to see what transpires.

Vic: Absolutely! It's such a joy to talk to you, Michelle. Thank you so much. 🌍



MICHELLE CLARKE

Michelle is a Global Leadership Coach and IAF Accredited Facilitator. Originally from South Africa, she is based in Santiago, Chile. After discovering Improv, she immediately fell in love with its powerful application to her coaching clients and to working teams. She has trained with Improv instructors Jason Delplanque, John Cremer, Joe Bill, and Gary Schwartz. She has studied musical Improv with Kaivalya Plays India and the Improv intensive hosted by the iO Theater in Chicago.

www.motivcoach.com
www.linkedin.com/in/michelleclarkecoach



VICTORA HOGG

Vic is a UK-based Confident Communications Coach who champions participant success via Applied Improvisation and low-risk, high-reward safe space. She coaches on Zoom and in-person. Her work (including new system "I.M.P.R.O.V. to Improve") is informed by an Applied Theatre Masters (Goldsmiths College) and 12 years of improv comedy training with a wide range of international trainers such as Keith Johnstone and those from Second City.

www.theofferbank.co.uk

Maarten Joosen transcribed and edited this article. This sections' inspiration has the same source as The Playground of Possibilities.

In memory of Kay Ross. Kay was a beloved member of the AIN community, the creator of The Playground of Possibilities (a card deck), and an invaluable copy editor and contributor in AIM Issue 1. Kay was a ray of kindness, ensuring new and experienced applied improvisers to feel at ease and home at any (virtual) occasion. She passed away in September 2023 in Hong Kong. She will be greatly missed. RIP.





PERSPECTIVE

In this section, you'll find pieces that explore the range of ways in which we imagine AI principles shaping our lives. In this issue, you can feel the love from a letter on Staying Healthy, and discover the Tao connection with Improvisation. In our regular column, AI Through My Eyes, practitioners share sources of inspiration, experience and insight. PERSPECTIVE invites us to challenge our perceptions and expand our vision.

AI Through My Eyes: Gabe Mercado



Spotlight on
GABE MERCADO

Where to see more of Gabe:
vivita.ph
vivita.global
thirdworldimprov.com
[@gabemercado \(X/Twitter\)](https://twitter.com/gabemercado)

Home base location (town, country):

Baguio City, Philippines.

Where/what/how or with whom do you use AI?

I use AI primarily with the youth now aged 8-18 in a creativity accelerator called Vivistop Baguio.

Fun Fact:

I used to be active doing theater, films and commercials when I still lived in Metro Manila. Also when I was a teenager, I got involved in the protest movement against former Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos. (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/874034/radyo-bandido-days-recalled>)

Why does AI speak to you?

Funny how when we say AI these days to most people, Artificial Intelligence comes up and not Applied Improvisation. It's also fortunate though because the power of our version of AI comes more into focus when juxtaposed with the emergence of the other AI. While machines and computers can learn and predict and generate through their algorithms, Applied Improvisation brings out the unpredictable, surprising, delightful sparks of casual genius that can result in authentic connection, spontaneity and joy that only imperfect humans can create.

What are some of your favorite themes to explore through AI?

Aside from the usual corporate-friendly applications in presentation skills, communicating effectively and working with a team, I have used Applied Improvisation for disaster readiness in my work with Mary Tyskiewicz and Heroic Improv, as well as my work with Applied Improvisation in Ignatian Spirituality. I am currently using Applied Improvisation in my work in Vivita – a creativity accelerator for youth.

What about AI has surprised you?

The biggest surprise that Applied Improvisation has given me is the global network of friends and colleagues that I have discovered through our network of practitioners. The ability to be on the same page and see eye to eye and work on long term projects with applied improvisers across different generations, cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds has been delightful.

“It’s important that we look for stories - not philosophical ramblings, or word definitions or anything fancy or deep. Just tell us who or what the word reminds you of in a minute.”

What is one AI activity that you do/lead/share?

We discovered this exercise through our sessions in SPIT (Silly People’s Improv Theater) and Third World Improv. It’s called *Tell That Story*. It starts as a simple word association circle. After a steady flowing rhythm of word association is established, we introduce the wrinkle that at any given time a person can call out “tell that story!” when a word, a facial expression or anything at all intrigues them. The person who is called out then has a minute to tell a true story, which doesn’t have to be dramatic or funny or anything at all that the word inspires in them. It’s important that we look for stories – not philosophical ramblings, or word definitions or anything fancy or deep. Just tell us who or what the word reminds you of in a minute.

Using the profound silliness that AI makes possible is very useful in doing innovation and creativity work among the youth I work with in Vivita (vivita.ph and vivita.global). I learned an exercise long ago called *Dumbest Idea First* where participants are presented with a problem but, instead of challenging them to come up with the best solution, the facilitator asks them to compete with each other to come up with the 5 dumbest ideas. This results in a fun, energy filled process with some of the ideas accidentally turning out some useful insights or solutions and with the teams being more willing to cooperate with each other. Using this exercise as a prelude to guiding my young participants through design thinking allows them to inject improvisational fun and serendipitous genius into the entire process.

With the help of AI what do you think is possible?

Applied Improvisation that is focused on igniting the human spark and fanning the flames of creativity is the key to harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, the other AI. 🌍



Interview by
ILENE BERGELSON

Ilene Bergelson is a presenter, educator and executive coach inspired by the principles of Applied Improvisation. Through her company, EmpowerSpeak™, she draws on best practices from AI, as well as her long career in the performing arts and coaching. Ilene has written numerous articles, created the audio series, *Light Bytes: The Communication Collection* and contributed to professional development books on career, presence and mindfulness themes.

www.empowerspeak.com

Improvisation is Tao in Western Context

Words by
BRIGHT SU

In the hot summer of 1990, I was about to take the *Gaokao*, the college entrance exam in China. It was a big deal and I was in fight mode. That day, my grandma handed me a bottle of tea and said, “Relax and do what you can, not necessarily the best. If you are nervous, breathe deep and drink tea.”

“Don’t do your best?! *Of course*, I will do my best!” I thought to myself, not wishing to argue with my grandma. I grabbed the bottle and walked fast to school. Over the next three days, I tried hard, slept poorly and rushed my exams in seven subjects. It turned out to

“Tao never strives, yet nothing is left undone.”

be...well...I underperformed and was offered a place only in a tier 2 college. I kind of failed.

Does this sound familiar? We might recall late improvisation master Keith Johnstone advocating, “Be average,” and “Be obvious.” He noted, “Please don’t do your best. Trying to do your best is trying to be better than you are.” This is exactly in line with Tao. *Tao Te Ching* says, “The Tao never strives, yet nothing is left undone.” (Chapter 37, 道常无为

而无不为). It equates to saying, “The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done.” The core teaching is Wuwei (无为) which translates as “non-doing” or “effortless doing”.

Johnstone even quotes the Chinese scripture in his seminal book, *Impro* (1979, p. 20): “The sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practises the teaching that uses no words.... When his task is accomplished and his work done the people all say, ‘It happened to us naturally’....”

When we are busy *doing*, trying our hardest, we are less capable of *being*. Human being is being



human. Just as flowing water does not compete for first place, so we have our own nature and ways of being wise. Johnstone is suggesting that being our average and normal selves is truer to our nature.

Improvisation is Tao in a western context. Improvisation is *The Way*. *The Way* is bigger than the Milky Way: It is universal wisdom.

One key improvisation principle is “Yes, and...” and that too, aligns with Tao. I see it as Tao’s *Yin* and *Yang*: “Yes” is Yin (passive, acceptive, shadow, empathetic, feminine); “and” is Yang (active, providing, shine, determinative, masculine).

There are so many (heated) arguments about the form, names and rules in improvisation. Whose improv is it anyway? If we understand improvisation as Tao, we may reach peace. *Tao Te Ching*’s first sentence states, “The Tao that can be told is not the enduring Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring name.” (道可道 · 非常道 · 名可名 · 非常名 ·) The same can be said of improvisation.

When we introduce an improvisation rule, such as “Yes, and...” or “Don’t ask questions,” the rule is not the enduring improvisation. Improvisation also allows for opposites, such as “Yes, but...”, “No, but...”, or “Ask a lot of questions.”

When we categorize improvisation under names, such as “Harold” or “Montage,” that too is never the enduring improvisation. It encompasses more forms than any

list of names can contain.

Even when improvisation manifests in language, it is limiting, telling only one side of the story. When Viola Spolin says in *Improvisation for the Theater 3e* (1999, p. 3), “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become ‘stageworthy,’” we see her point and appreciate the invitation. But anyone who has sat through a few bad improv shows also knows that not everyone should be performing in front of an audience!

Any rule, form or linguistic expression manifests or points to certain aspects of improvisation and cannot be the totality. True improvisation is ruleless, formless and beyond language.

In a philosophical nutshell, Spolin’s approach to improvisation is Zen (Mindfulness), while Johnstone’s approach is Tao (Wuwei). These are two different yet overlapping paths. Spolin again sums it up wonderfully: “The heart of improvisation is transformation.” (1999, p. 39)

In July 2001, another hot summer, I was about to attend my MBA program in the US. Everything was ready except the visa, and I knew that many applicants were being denied. My grandma had passed away by then, but her words were still with me. I patiently waited in line at the US consulate for the visa interview, taking deep breaths and sipping my tea. And yes, I talked to the officer for three

minutes, effortlessly. It was a success.

I’ve been fortunate to incorporate my spiritual practice with my improvisation journey. Improvisation is Zen and Tao in a western context. Play is my visa to inner freedom. And improvisation is the way to...anywhere...everywhere. 🌍



JI XING XI JU
(IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE)



BRIGHT SU

Bright grew up in China, has lived in the US since 2001, and began studying improvisation in 2008. He is the author of *Ji Xing Xi Ju (Improvisational Theatre)*, a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation, published in 2020. He serves as Editor-in-Chief for the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM).

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WHAT'S HOT



Here we cover news and conferences. This time, our Vancouver conference chairperson looks back from a hosting perspective, and two dedicated attendees share their personal reflections. We invite you to join us in indulging in the richness of photos on the ground. Proceed with caution, it's hot!

Reimagining the Conference Experience

Words by

KIRSTEN ANDERSON

What might be possible if we took the time to reimagine more of what we do?

In July of 2022, a team of volunteers near Vancouver, British Columbia, in Canada, came together to plan the in-person conference to be held in July of 2023. Though most of us had not met in person, thanks to years of Open Space we knew each other at least virtually.

With a staggering nine out of ten organizing committee members never having been to an in-person AIN conference before, the choice of *ReimAgINe* as our theme seemed like a natural fit. We set out to play with the balance of traditions, rituals, expectations, novelty, and never-been-done-before additions.

Here are three insights from our consistent ReimAgINing process to apply to your projects and work:

1. Make It Fun

Carla Vigarà, the chair of the Spain AIN22 conference, gave a piece of advice that helped as a reminder: “Don’t take things too seriously.” It wasn’t easy all of the time, but it was a touchstone that we kept returning to.

TIP: Whatever the project or interaction, we can keep asking ourselves, “How do we make this more fun, more playful?”

2. Align on Values

Who you work with matters to your success and enjoyment, and the 2023 organizing team was exceptional on both fronts! First, we discussed values and intentions around the planning process: how we as individuals and as a team would work together with an improviser’s mindset. Second, we considered the values of the organization, and how these values would be demonstrated. We wanted them to shine through in all that we created in our communications and integrated into the conference.

TIP: Align on values early, for your team formation, processes, communications, and objectives.

3. Permission To Be Imperfect Together

We were not able to control all that happened at the conference but we were able to control how we reacted to it. In my opening remarks, I mentioned the classic

analogy of the duck gliding over water while the feet are quickly paddling beneath the surface. This was a pre-emptive reality check for us as volunteers and for participants that, yes, things would go wrong, and we would work intensely in the background to problem-solve. When overwhelm built up, we knew we had each other’s backs and were determined to make each other look good.

“We set out to play with the balance of traditions, rituals, expectations, novelty, and never-been-done-before additions.”

TIP: Accept that there will be mistakes, “failures,” things that won’t go as planned, and that we will have compassion not only for each other but for ourselves.

What were *some* of the specific, ‘never-been-done-before’ additions to the conference to represent the values of fun, playfulness, and connection?



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTEN ANDERSON

ThoughtExchange: David Guthro created surveys for AIN members to identify priorities. The results gave us validation to keep gaps between sessions. These breaks needed to be long enough for those impromptu conversations and connection while also giving direction for our programming choices.

Billeting: Avril Orloff generously offered to help find and match up local volunteer host homes for those that could use help with accommodation costs. This generosity was such a hit, one of our recipients bought a learning journey for their host as an act of thanks and many new friendships were formed!

Trading cards: Brett MacDonald was the brain behind the random cards (similar to Pokéman or baseball cards) given out at registration to all attendees. They depicted each of the organizing team and featured speakers with amusing powers and weaknesses. This created an excuse to approach

those we didn't yet know in hopes of collecting and trading to complete a full set of fourteen, plus the elusive Colin Mochrie card.

Doughnut Wall: At our opening, we had a novel way to display award winning doughnuts on a wall of pegs. Eating these "hole foods" elicited surprise, delight, and mingling!

Tiny Toy Toilet: It even made flushing sounds so that participants could write down any small frustrations or annoyances they wanted to express, let go of, and throw in the toilet. This was one way we wanted to play with the idea of us being imperfect together. Our caring ombudsperson, Chris Esparza, set us up for psychological safety as we heard where to take any serious concerns.

Birds of a Feather: cards placed in the centerpieces with different themes to bring people together

at our first lunch. These diverse and inclusive conversation prompts were an opportunity to find those who wanted to discuss topics of shared interest so that first-time attendees felt included early on.

Silent Disco had a hundred of us wearing headphones, listening to music, and dancing in the streets in unison under a full moon and a sky of fireworks. It was fun, public, improvised play, and human connection, embodying the identified values.

Back in July 2022, the organizing committee had set out to be imperfect, together. Valuing playful connection, we had a clear mission to ReimAgINe what was possible for the conference, our team, and 225 attendees from 16 countries.

The result was collective effervescence, worthy of a standing ovation, with relationships and ripple effects sure to spread beyond our community for years to come. 🌍



KIRSTEN ANDERSON

After 25 years as an entrepreneur and play expert on GlobalTV, Kirsten sold her award-winning toy store to bridge her expertise in leadership & the bottom-line benefits of playfulness at work. International keynote speaker, facilitator, and founder of Integrate Play Solutions, Kirsten is helping teams improve creativity, culture, communication, and psychological safety utilizing Applied Improvisation and LEGO Serious Play.

[@KirstenPlaying \(X/Twitter\)](#)

WHAT'S HOT



WHERE WE ARE HEADING

As I reflect on the incredible journey we've shared through the magazine pages, I'm filled with gratitude for the vibrant community that has grown around our publication. Much appreciation goes to the Magazine Staff team members (see next page). The entire Editorial Team are all volunteers! The power of improvisation has united us all (the staff, authors and readers) in a unique and profound way.

Improvisation, as a dynamic performing art form, has gone global. We can find an improv show in Chicago, Oslo, Shanghai, Johannesburg, São Paulo and many corners around the world. With the passing of the much respected impro giant, Keith Johnstone (1933–2023), in March, generations of improvisors continue the journey, on and off the stage, blending the teachings from other giants, Viola Spolin (1906–1994) and Del Close (1934–1999). Performers are often Applied Improvisation practitioners, many of whom are active in neighboring disciplines, such as consulting, coaching, training, psychology and more. The communities cross-train!

Applied Improvisation has increasingly gained traction in the past 20 years. It is becoming global, and will transcend borders. Go wide and go deep!

Yes, and look at the authors in this Issue! We have 22 authors from 10 countries and three continents, with diverse backgrounds. For future issues, I call on and welcome writers from currently underrepresented geographies, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America. The stories and insights that you are about to entrust us with will not only enrich our understanding of this dynamic field but also inspire countless individuals to embrace the spirit of improvisation. I'm excited to see how the seeds we've planted together will continue to flourish.

Your feedback to this Issue is very much welcome. Please use [THIS LINK](#), it takes only a few minutes. If you would like to volunteer for magazine production or send in general comments or questions, please reach out at appliedimprovisationmagazine@gmail.com. Let's AIM HIGH.

Improvise on!

Bright Su
January 2024

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ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY

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UnDraw



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Making your partner look good
Yes, and...
Atmosphere of play
Curious listening
Complete acceptance



aim

APPLIED IMPROVISATION MAGAZINE

Flexibility/Spontaneity
Focus on the here and now
Risk taking
Personal awareness/mindfulness
Balance of freedom and structure