

Dynamic and Effective Teaching Using Applied Improvisation

Structure and Improvisation yield Flexibility and Presence in the Classroom

Presented by



Paul (Sparky) Johnson

Founding member of Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre
An actor/writer with The Second City Review Theatre.

Worked closely with theatre legend, the late Paul Sills – founder of The Second City and son of Viola Spolin (considered the mother of modern-day improvisation).

Selected to take over and carry on Sills' renowned acting workshops in Door County, Wisconsin.

Guest artist at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts summer program for drama students.

For the past thirty-three years, Sparky has been a full-time drama professor with the Augustana Faculty of the University of Alberta.

Upside-Down Introductions

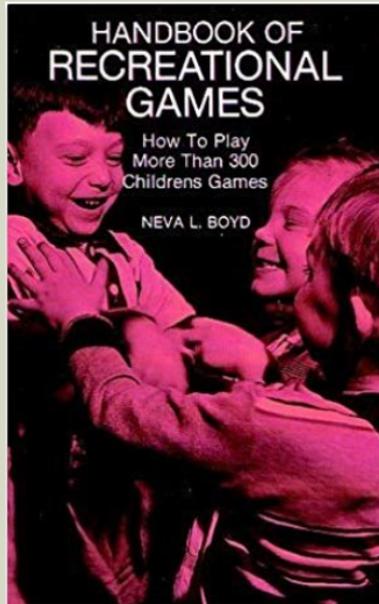
(Providing a direct experience in “being who you are and who you’re not”)

In pairs, participants tell each other about themselves, including why and how they became a professor

Each, then, introduces their partner to the larger group – but in the first person – playing the role of their partner



Cacophony of sounds, by John Minnion

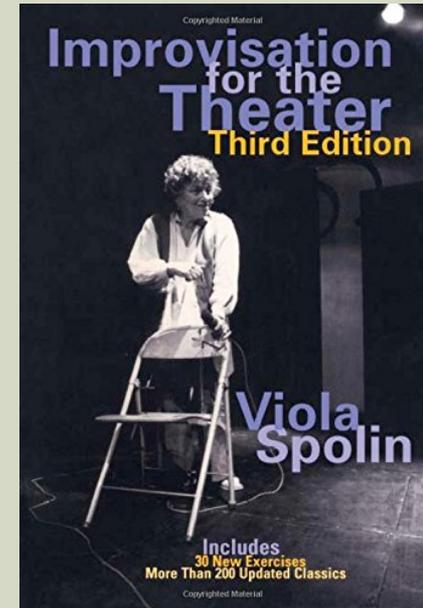


Neva Boyd (1876-1963)

“My vision is a world of accessible intuition.”



Viola Spolin
(1906 – 1994)



When it bogs down, play a game.

Paul Sills' Sayings of Viola Spolin

Talk to My Agent

(“Getting to know” with a quick infusion of energy)

groups of 3: (Reporter, Subject, Agent)

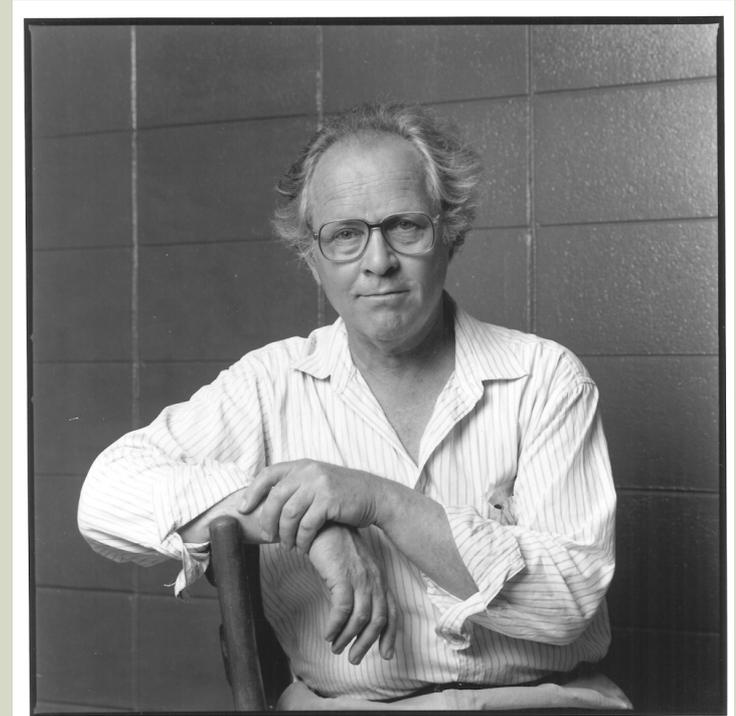
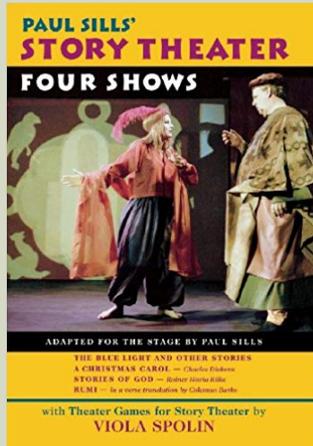
Reporter to Subject: “Name one thing you love about yourself”

Agent immediately jumps in and provides an energetic and heightened pitch of the subjects chosen attribute.

Repeat until everyone has had the chance to play all three roles

It is on intuition, by the way, that Viola is an authority;
intuition being the direct knowing of something without
the conscious use of reasoning.

It is a way of knowing other than intellectual knowing.

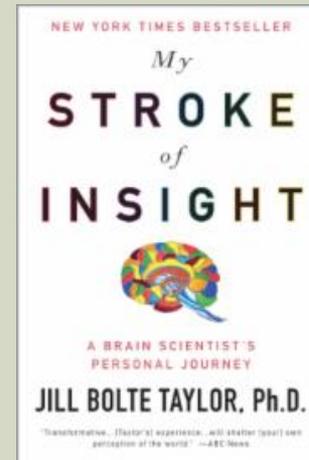


Paul Sills
(1927 – 2008)



Jill Bolte Taylor

- Born in 1959
- Neuroanatomist (specializing in the postmortem investigation of the human brain as it relates to schizophrenia and the severe mental illnesses).
- In December of 1996 (at the age of 37) she experienced a rare form of stroke, an arterio-venous malformation (AVM). Two and a half weeks later, she underwent major brain surgery to remove a golf ball size blood clot that was placing pressure on the language centers in the left hemisphere of her brain
- *“My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist’s Personal Journey”* published in 2006



Picture Story

(A practical exploration into the power of storytelling to develop a strong and personal connection with an audience.)

Using a blank piece of paper, players describe the “who, what and where” of the “photograph;” including the story behind it and any relationships between the people in it.

Describe a photograph of a professor in the process of teaching.

A child is born into this world and knows
everything.

And then they go to school.

Unpublished Sayings of Viola Spolin

Teaching as Performance

- Teachers stand at the front of the classroom, “on stage”
- Perform for their “audience,” the students
- Utilize skills of the actor:
 - If a teacher is entertaining and animated, students will be more attentive.
 - If a teacher speaks clearly and projects the voice, students are more likely to hear and understand.
 - As in theater, good communication involves connecting with your audience.
- Effective teaching involves rehearsal, scripting, timing and stage presence.

Teaching as Sales

- Teachers must effectively sell their students on the idea they invest time, attention and effort into the subject being taught—knowing they will be better off as a result.

Teaching as Improvisation

- Skillful improvisation always resides at the tension between structure and freedom
- Both structure and improvisation are essential to good teaching.
 - Expert teachers engage in disciplined improvisation – they have mastered the knowledge base of expertise and they know how to apply this expertise in improvisational practice.
- Disciplined Improvisation: creativity guided by the constraints of prior planning.



Diamond Dance

(A great and fun way to get people up on their feet and moving.)

Number the four sides of the room (1 – 4) for the front, back, right wall, left wall of the room.

Explain to the group that they are to face whichever direction is appropriate for the number called: when 1 is called, they all face front; when 2 is called, they all face the right; etc.

They are to follow the movement of whoever is in front of them. If no one is in front of them, they are the leader.

Play party dance style music and call out numbers, giving each number a couple of turns.

Gibberish/English combined with Gibberish Demonstration

(Communication that transcends language.)

Player(s) demonstrate or teach a concept, product or skill while being side-coached between Gibberish and English

Conversation, while in Gibberish, is to flow normally and advance in meaning

Throwing Light

(An entertaining and challenging way to discuss a secret topic related to the subject area that can eventually involve the entire group. The game can stand as a practical demonstration of how the power of story can help to get us out of our heads and into the present moment.)

Two players choose a topic of conversation. They engage in conversation about the topic without directly mentioning it.

They try to mislead the others without making false statements.

The others may not ask questions or guess the topic aloud, but are to join the conversation when they feel they know its subject.

Sources

- Alda, Alan. *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?: My Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating*. New York: Random House. 2017
- McClure, Caitlin, and Theresa Robbins Dudeck, eds. *Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating, and Creating Beyond the Theatre*. London: Methuen Drama. 2018
- Pink, Daniel H. *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth about Moving Others*. New York: Riverhead Books. 2012
- Sawyer, R. Keith, ed. *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011.
- Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater (3rd edition)*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1999.