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The BUGS Are Coming!

Improvisation and Early Childhood Teaching

In the toddler room Susan reads to children seated on the carpet. Several children eat dry cereal at the snack table. Two-and-a-half-year-old Mariel takes a huge handful of cereal and heads over to the block area.

"Mariel, you need to go back to the table to finish your cereal," Susan calls out.
Mariel pauses and points to the floor. "Bugs." Susan looks down, then says to herself, Whew! She’s just playing. I told the children about crumbs attracting bugs months ago. Mariel still remembers. I can work with this.

"Where are the bugs?" asks Susan.
Mariel points under the magnetic number board.
"Really?" Susan gasps in mock surprise, "Underneath the number board?"
Mariel grabs her friend Jessie’s arm. "Jessie, bugs are coming." Jessie shrieks and begins running in circles. "The bugs are coming," the two girls chant in unison. The children listening to the story are now watching the action.

"Uh oh, Susan thinks, this is getting a little wild. But it’s very interesting play. Maybe I should get involved.
"You can see the bugs coming?" asks Susan.
"Mariel, take a look at the floor. Is it clean?" Mariel nods excitedly.
"If you can see the bugs coming, I’d better make a call to tell them our floor is clean." Susan goes over to the telephone on the wall. "Hello, bugs? Don’t come to our classroom; it’s clean. OK?"

Susan hangs up. She announces in a loud voice, "The bugs won’t come to our room. We keep our room clean."

Moments like this occur frequently in developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms. When young children are free to explore their interests and make choices, they do and say unpredictable things. Teachers must continually choose how to respond, because at any given moment an activity can go off in an unexpected direction.

In this scenario Mariel responds to Susan’s reminder about a classroom rule with the fantasy suggestion that there are bugs on the floor. For Susan, this response could be hilarious, annoying, cute, interesting, distracting, or frightening.

Should Susan act as an observer, allowing Mariel to play out her bug fantasy without joining in? Does she involve herself in Mariel’s play in order to bring skills and information to the game? Is there a way to react that is not about deciding between these two options but rather is about responding to what is going on at that moment and creating something with the children?

Some might argue that Susan should be cautious about including herself in Mariel’s bug fantasy. They would say that play is valuable for children because it belongs to them (Jones & Reynolds 1992). If Susan becomes involved, she might dominate the play and detract from the children’s experience (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers 1996).

Others would encourage Susan to join the children’s play, with the goal of introducing social skills and information about bugs and cleanliness (Kitson 1994; Wood & Attfield 1996). They could point to research showing that play is primarily useful to children as a learning activity (Meadows & Cashden 1988; Hutt et al. 1989; Smilansky 1990). From this perspective children’s learning increases when teachers involve themselves as co-players.

Both perspectives have merit. Each encourages teachers to be thoughtful in their interactions with children. However, I believe that we teachers often miss opportunities for creative and meaningful interactions when we reduce the choice to one between child-centered and teacher-directed activity.

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Improvisation and the early childhood classroom

Another way to view the interaction between Susan and the children is as an improvised scene similar to a performance on television or at a comedy club. Thinking of the activity as improvisation reveals the ways in which early childhood classrooms are not purely child centered or adult directed, but are an ongoing collaboration. Everyone, teachers and children alike, contributes to the creation of a new, emergent scene. What is interesting is how Susan and the children spontaneously and collectively create it.

Just as the activity in an early childhood classroom resembles an improvised scene, improvisation in many ways resembles the pretend play of early childhood (Sawyer 1997b). As with children’s play, theatrical improvisation is created without a written script or plot. It is an art form in which no one, not even the participants, knows where the game, scene, or story will end up, because it is being created as it goes along. Improvisers are trained to create, direct, and act collectively, all within view of the audience.

In many ways improvisation is the most ordinary of activities. People are not given a script at birth and advised to memorize their lines before they participate in life. They improvise every day—when they smile at others on the street, when they choose what to eat for breakfast, and when they engage in conversations. For the most part people are not conscious of their improvisational activity and are unaware of their improvisational ability. They think improvisation belongs on stage and is the sole domain of skilled actors.

Early childhood teachers deal with the unexpected all the time—spilled juice, lost gerbils, or broken zippers can interrupt even the most well-planned day. When teachers engage in improvisational activity, as Susan did, it produces a classroom environment where children’s creativity is supported and developed.
Characteristics of improvisation

The characteristics of interactions in early childhood classrooms are similar to those of improvised performances. The main characteristics are spontaneity, not ruling out ideas, giving offers, building on others' offers, and the group's creating the scene collectively.

Being spontaneous. Spontaneity is the primary characteristic of improvisation (Spolin 1963; Johnstone [1979] 1992; Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994). Performers must stay in the moment and not tie themselves to a particular goal or direction. Improvisation forces people to break with preconceived ideas about what is supposed to happen and to go with the unexpected. Conscious spontaneity is not easy to achieve in a culture that values guaranteed outcomes and planned agendas. In this world, improvisational activity can feel unnatural.

Using everything. Improvisation depends on performers' willingness to use everything, including ideas they consider crazy, heretical, or just plain boring. It is based on a belief that people can create something worthwhile out of almost anything and that the unexpected is not a problem, but the seed of creativity. Improvisers create using whatever their fellow performers give them, even when it does not fit with what they wanted or anticipated. Improvisation is paradoxical—to be successful, performers must fully commit to their own suggestions and then be willing to go in a completely different direction.

Giving and receiving offers. Improvisation is about giving and receiving offers (anything a performer says or does in a scene is an offer) (Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994; Wacky World 2001). All offers must be accepted, and players must relate to everything that happens in a scene as real. For example, if two players are on stage and one says, "It sure is hot here on the moon," the other must accept that they are on the moon and build on it, adding something new. "Let's hike over to the dark side and see if we can find some shade" might be an appropriate response. Players trust that their fellow improvisers will be able to use their suggestions to create a successful scene.

Creating collectively. Finally, improvisation is about creating something collectively; one person is neither responsible for nor credited with the development of the performance (Spolin 1963; Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994; Sawyer 1997a). The collective creation of the scene demands that the players work together, rather than focusing on individual ideas, goals, or egos. It assumes a commitment to the whole rather than the particular. The art of improvisation is the art of people creating collectively.

Guidelines for Improvisers

- Relate to yourself as a supporting actor.
- Do not enter a scene unless you are needed.
- Make your fellow actors look good.
- Trust your fellow players to support you.
- Do not judge what is going on except in terms of what you can do to help.
- Most of all, listen.

(Halpern, Close, & Johnson 1994)

The improvised scene is extended

How is the interaction between Susan and the children improvisational? The scene began when Susan asked Mariel to take her food back to the table and Mariel responded playfully. There are several ways to interpret this exchange. From an improvisational perspective, Mariel's comment and Susan's response is the giving and receiving of an offer. When Mariel said "Bugs," Susan, in true improvisational fashion, accepted that the bugs were in the room and then went further by calling the bugs on the telephone. Throughout the interaction, Susan and the children picked up on each other's offers and then responded in ways that continued to develop the scene.

First Sleepover

Abby at age five was thrilled to be going on her first real sleepover, even if it was only to her cousin's house. She was dropped off in the late afternoon, so she and Colleen didn't have much time to play before dinner. After dinner Colleen's father read the girls a story and then announced it was time to go to sleep. Abby looked up at him and said in a quite determined voice, "I came to play, not sleep!"

Gail Perry is the book editor for Young Children.

Gail Perry
After Susan chose to accept and build on Mariel’s offer of the bugs, the play continued.

Susan hangs up the phone. “The bugs won’t come to our room. We keep our room clean...” She gasps and points to the floor. “Cereal?”

Mariel looks up at Susan and smiles. “Cereal!”

Jessie leans down and picks up the cereal. Susan points with great urgency to the garbage can. “Hurry! Hurry! To the garbage, hurry!”

Jessie runs over, drops the cereal in the garbage, and looks proudly at Susan.

Susan pretends to wipe sweat from her forehead and takes a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Jessie. All right, Mariel, I think we’re safe. No bugs will come here.”

Mariel, sensing that the game might end, calls out, “The bugs!”

Susan asks, “Where are they? In your lunch bag? Should I call them again?” Susan goes back to the phone, followed by four or five children who have come from the rug to join the play. “Hello, bugs, don’t come here. We keep our room clean.”

Two-year-old Joseph points to a dirty spot on the floor and says, “I see bug.”

Susan listens intently on the telephone. “The bugs say there is some cereal on the floor and that’s why they keep coming.” She hangs up the phone. “Mariel, children, check the floor... check the rug... look everywhere.”

Most of the 10 children in the group now crawl on the floor looking for bugs. Some take goggles and helmets from the dramatic play area and dress up as bug collectors. Others go into the bathroom chanting, “No bugs here, no, no, no.” Several children sit around a toy telephone having a conversation with the bugs. The bug scene continues for 30 minutes.

In the middle of the scene, when much of the group had joined the play, one child stood at the light switch, turning the lights on and off (an activity he often did by himself). Susan looked over and said to him, “You’re making sure the lights are on so we can see the bugs. Thanks, Takashi.”

Susan was not the only one in the scene who picked up offers. When Susan successfully included Takashi in the scene, Mariel ran over and searched for bugs on the floor where he stood. When Susan told the children the room needed to be checked for bugs, two children who had previously been on the periphery of the scene put on goggles and white protective hats and became bug collectors.

The children in Susan’s class ranged in age from 20 to 35 months, and their language development was varied. Several, including Mariel, had well-developed vocabularies; others came from homes where English was not the primary language, and some were just beginning to use verbal language. This group would not typically be expected to sustain long periods of social or cooperative play. However, the bug scene lasted 30 minutes and ultimately included all the children.
Children did not compete for control of the scene or for Susan’s attention, because she suggested different ways for them to join in the play.

**Teachers and children as improvisers**

Viewing the classroom activity as an improvised scene shows the strengths of the teachers and children. From a theatrical perspective Susan served as a skilled improviser. She took a great deal of responsibility for the overall production of the scene, but she did not control the activity. She made sure that all the children could participate, listened for offers that might move the scene forward, and provided suggestions to help shape the scene. As an improviser, Susan looked out for the overall success of the scene and fully supported her fellow performers—in this case, the children.

If Susan is viewed as a skilled improviser, the children can be viewed as naturally gifted improvisers. Children improvise all the time, largely because they do not always know what is supposed to happen. Adults know that B follows A, and they have difficulty thinking that things could be otherwise.

One of the key elements of good improvisation is that its progression is nonlinear: there is never a single right or appropriate response to an offer.

Good improvisers make offers that others do not expect. In the bug interaction, from the beginning the children provided many of the unexpected or unconventional offers. Their offers took the scene beyond a predictable conversation about classroom cleanliness. Skilled teachers can help create an environment where children’s offers are used to move classroom activities in new and interesting directions.

**What does improvisation offer?**

Spontaneity, unexpected events, and working with a group of people—what day in an early childhood classroom does not include these features? Furthermore, what early childhood teacher does not strive to respond to these very things, sometimes viewing them as problems or obstacles to the goal of creating a develop mentally appropriate learning environment for the children?

Improvisation requires people to break with preconceived ideas and make the most of unexpected

**Improvisation Concepts**

**Spontaneity:** Performers must stay in the moment and not become tied to a particular goal or direction.

**Everything is useful:** Improvisation depends on the performers’ willingness to use everything.

**Giving and receiving offers:** Offers are anything a performer says or does in a scene. All offers must be accepted.

**“Yes, and . . .”** Improvisers build on offers by adding something new. Every time improvisers speak or move in a scene, they strive to build on what came before and add something that will take the scene further.

**Creating collectively:** One person is neither responsible for nor credited with the development of a performance.
events. It calls for a spirit of collaboration and the group’s commitment to working collectively rather than following individual pursuits. Improvisation provides a way of thinking about teaching that more accurately reflects the real world of the classroom. When teachers view classroom interactions as improvisations, not child-centered or teacher-directed activities, and see themselves and the children as improvisers, teachers can expand the potential for creative interactions. These interactions can foster an environment where children learn to make use of their creativity in ways that support the development of the group.

References


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Where Are They Going?

Bonnie Kittredge

In mid-December I visited a Head Start program in a tiny Yupik Eskimo village on the west coast of Alaska. Everyone except me spoke Yupik, so I had to rely on visual clues as I watched the children absorbed in play.

The dramatic play area was set up like an office, with a nonfunctioning computer and keyboard. Three children wearing hard hats were sitting in chairs, one directly behind the other. The first of the three faced the computer screen and was making all kinds of hand motions. They sat in a row for perhaps 20 minutes.

When another child walked down the row of three, speaking with each one and pretending to write on an invisible notepad, I realized what I was observing. This child was a flight attendant taking drink orders. The first in the row was the pilot, the computer the cockpit. The other two children were passengers sitting quietly engaged in a conversation.

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